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Asimov's SCIENCE FICTION

DECEMBER 2002

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Robert Reed
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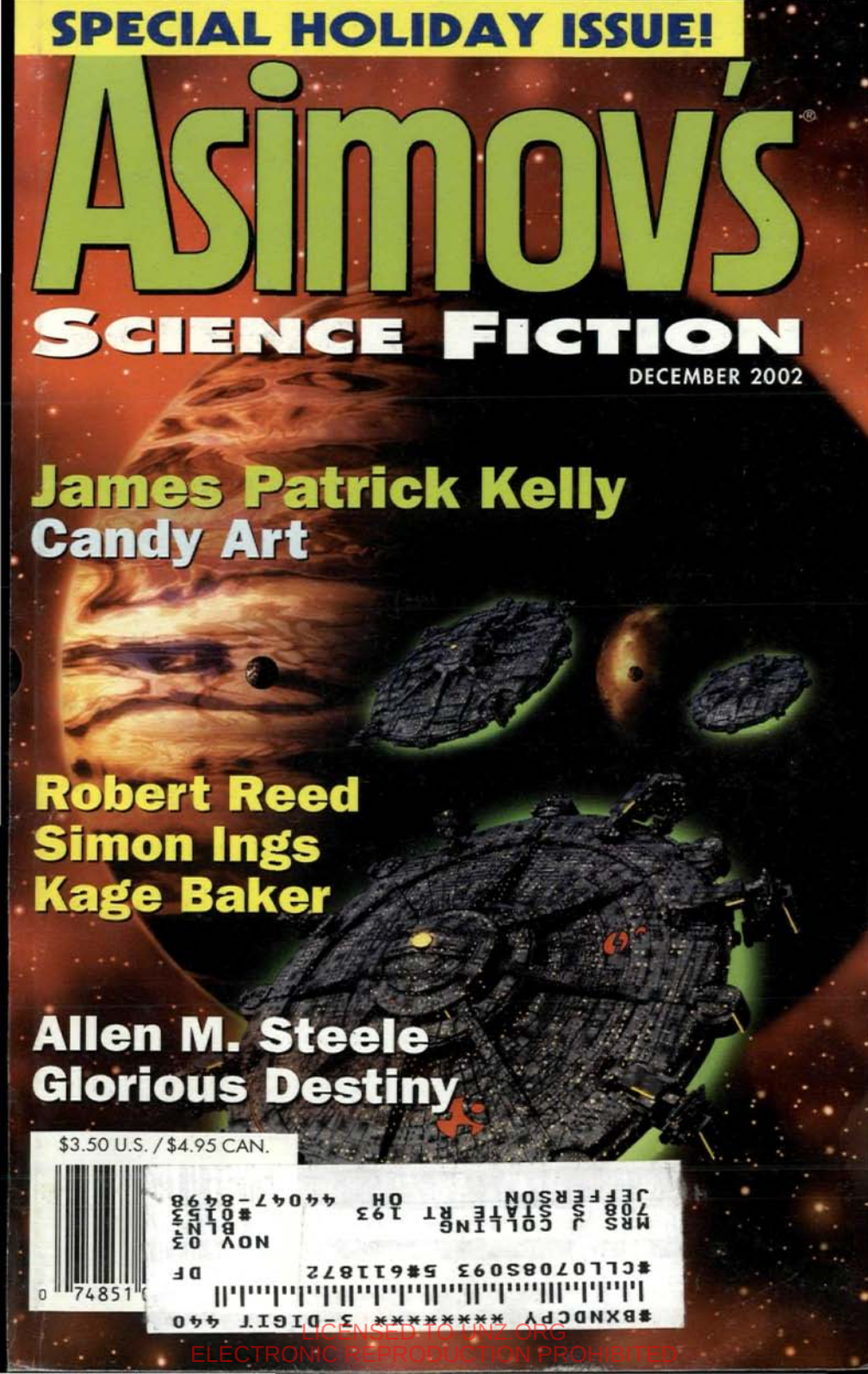
Glorious Destiny



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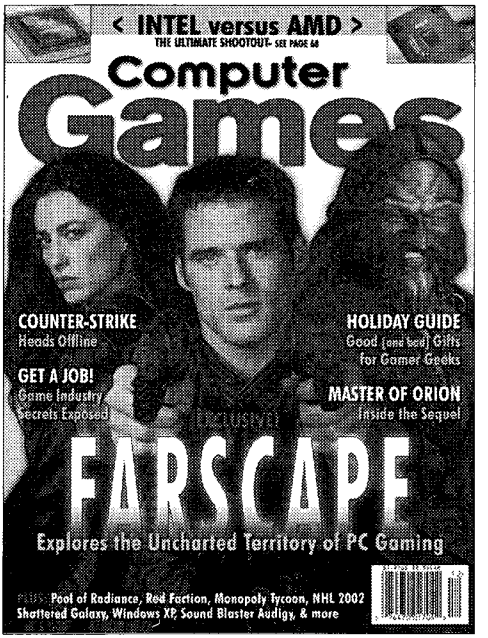

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Stories from Asimov's have won 39 Hugos and 24 Nebula Awards, and our editors have received 16 Hugo Awards for Best Editor. Asimov's was also the 2001 recipient of the Locus Award for Best Magazine.

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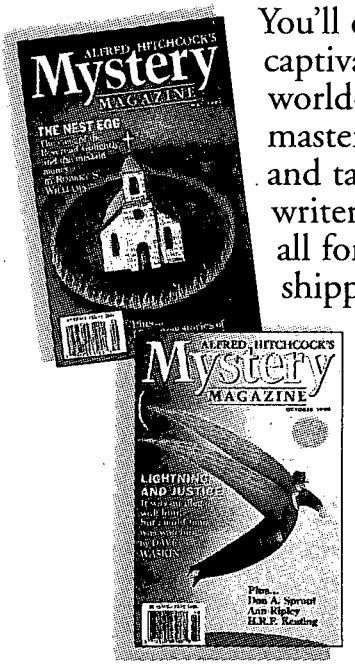

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

PRODIGIES

At the 1999 World Science Fiction Convention in Melbourne, Australia, I heard a good deal about Catherine McMullen, the eleven-year-old daughter of Australian SF writer Sean McMullen, who had just sold her first story to a professional science fiction magazine. Such accounts of child prodigies in the SF business always catch my attention, since I made my own start at an early age, as have a good many others in the field. But none of us can match the prodigiousness of young Ms. McMullen, who now, at the age of fourteen or so, is evidently still selling stories at a steady clip and settling down to a robust career. She is the newest and most spectacular in a long series of such prodigies in our field, going back to the time when Hugo Gernsback invented science fiction magazines in 1926. Starting young is a grand and glorious tradition for us.

Consider the case of Isaac Asimov, whose name adorns this very magazine. Isaac, born in 1920, sold his first story, "Marooned off Vesta," in October, 1938, when he was still a few months short of nineteen. By the time he was twenty-one he had written the novella "Nightfall," one of science fiction's all-time classics. (His friends were fond of telling him that his career had been going straight downhill from there for decades. You can imagine how amused by that he was.)

Then there is the wondrous Jack Williamson, born in 1908, who wrote "The Metal Man" the year he turned twenty and saw it published in Gernsback's *Amazing Stories* before he was twenty-one. (The extraordinary thing about Williamson is that he would live long enough to become a *senior* prodigy too. In 2001, at the age of ninety-three, he became the oldest writer ever to win a Hugo award—named for *Amazing*'s founder—when his story "The Ultimate Earth" was voted best novella of the year.)

Jack Williamson was twenty-seven years old, and Isaac Asimov fifteen, the year I was born, and I was thirteen when I began sending my first stories to the editors of the SF magazines. They sent them right back, of course. But at the Asimovian age of eighteen I actually sold one (a novel, no less, *Revolt on Alpha C*), and then a bunch of stories, and by the time I was twenty-one I had won a Hugo as the most promising new author of the year. A fast start indeed, though not quite as fast as Isaac's, since I wrote nothing that year that would be remembered as long as "Nightfall" has been.

But the annals of science fiction publishing are full of tales of youthful prodigies. Some went on to long and glorious careers; others are mere footnotes in the history books now.

In the first category we find Samuel R. Delany, whose first novel, *The Jewels of Aptor,* was published when he was twenty, in 1962, and whose book *Babel-17* brought him a Nebula at twenty-five. We have Ray Bradbury, twenty-one when his first story, "Pendulum," appeared in the long-forgotten *Super Science Stories*. There was John Brunner, seventeen when his pseudonymous first novel, *Galactic Storm,* ap-

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peared, and nineteen when his novella "Thou Good and Faithful" appeared in *Astounding SF,* the leading magazine of its era. Harlan Ellison, twenty-one in 1955, sold "Glowworm," his first, to *Infinity SF,* and went on to sell dozens more in the next year or two. And let us not forget our very own Gardner Dozois, not just a Hugo-caliber editor but a distinguished SF writer, who was eighteen when he sold his first story, "The Empty Man," published in 1966 and nominated for a Nebula.

But then we have George F. Locke, who was fifteen, in 1926, when his story "Smoke Rings" appeared in his high school literary magazine under the pseudonym of "George McLociard." Hugo Gernsback thought it was good enough to reprint in *Amazing* in 1928, when its author was still only seventeen, and went on to buy three more from him. But the name of George McLociard was not heard of in science fiction again after 1931.

Another Gernsback phenomenon was G. Peyton Wertenbaker, born in 1907, who at the age of 16 was selling stories to Gernsback's popular science magazine, *Science and Invention,* that would be reprinted a few years later in *Amazing.* From 1926 to 1930 Wertenbaker was one of Gernsback's most popular authors, and several of his stories were reprinted in anthologies decades later. But his career as a science fiction author was over by the time he was twenty-four, though he lived until 1968.

Then we have the sad tale of Charles Cloukey, who was granted just twenty years on this planet, from 1912 to 1932. At sixteen his story "Paradox" appeared in one of Gernsback's magazines, and it was quickly followed by two sequels that seemed to be establishing him as a master of the time-travel story. But then there were no more. A similar trajectory, back in those ancient

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days, was traced by David R. Daniels (1915-1936), who published five well-liked stories in swift succession in 1935 and 1936 before taking his own life.

Allow me a few more excursions into Paleozoic science fiction:

—Frank K. Kelly, born in 1914, a contributor to Gernsback's *Wonder Stories* by 1931, the author of the wildly popular "Star Ship Invincible" four years later, gave up science fiction at that point and went on to a distinguished career elsewhere, with material published in *The New Yorker, Esquire,* etc. His memoir of his days as a young science fiction writer, "My Interplanetary Teens," was published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1947.

—P. Schuyler Miller (1912-1974), who began selling stories to Gernsback in his teens, wrote a number of memorable stories in the 1930s and 1940s, and then gave up writing fiction altogether, though he ran the book review column in *Astounding* for many years and was a familiar face at SF conventions until his death.

—John W. Campbell, Jr. (1910-1971), who sold "When the Atoms Failed" to *Amazing* in 1929, when he was nineteen, went on to become one of the two or three best SF writers of the decade while still in his twenties, and at age twenty-seven became editor of *Astounding Stories,* which he would turn into the dominant magazine of the field.

—Charles D. Hornig, not a writer, but a prodigy of a different sort, the youngest SF *editor* ever. In 1933, when he was seventeen, Hornig, who was publishing an amateur magazine called *The Fantasy Fan,* sent a copy to Gernsback, who happened to be looking for a new editor just then. He was so impressed with Hornig's magazine that he sent for him and hired him, and until 1936, when the magazine was sold, Hornig was *Wonder Stories'* editor. (For some of that time he attended evening classes in order to finish high school while editing for Gernsback during the day.)

When a host of new pulp SF magazines came into being in the early 1940s, another crowd of youthful editors, though not quite as young as Hornig had been, entered the field: Frederik Pohl, Donald A. Wollheim, and Robert W. Lowndes, a trio of friends who belonged to the same SF club in New York. Pohl (who had had a poem accepted by *Amazing* when he was sixteen, in 1936), became the editor of *Astonishing Stories* and *Super Science Stories* four years later. Wollheim, who had sold a story to Gernsback when he was seventeen, in 1934, was named editor of *Stirring Science Stories* and *Cosmic Stories* in 1941, at twenty-four. Lowndes, also twenty-four in 1941, took over the editorship of *Future Fiction,* which Charles Hornig had founded after leaving Gernsback. All three young editors wrote stories for each other's magazines, and also published the work of their even younger friends: Damon Knight (born 1922, first published story 1941), James Blish (born 1921, first published story 1940), and Cyril Kornbluth (born 1923, and just sixteen when he started selling to Pohl's *Super Science* in 1940.) All these magazines were swept away within a couple of years by the paper shortages brought by World War II, but, of course, Pohl, Wollheim, Lowndes, Blish, Knight, and Kornbluth went on to significant SF careers in the postwar world.

We find plenty of early starters in that postwar era, too: not just the aforesaid Brunner, Ellison, Silverberg, and Delany, but also Algis Budrys, twenty-one at the time of his first sale in 1952; Jane Gaskell, whose first novel, *Strange Evil,* written at fourteen, was published

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two years later in 1957; Terry Pratchett, not quite fifteen when he sold his first short story to the British magazine *Science Fantasy;* Bruce McAllister, who launched his career in 1963, at seventeen, and has been publishing SF sporadically ever since (he was most recently here in *Asimov's* in 1993); Greg Bear, sixteen when his first story, "Destroyers," appeared in 1967; and—one that I remember only too well—Joel Nydahl, who was all of thirteen in 1953 when he sold "Lesson for Today" to a well-known magazine of that time, *Imagination*. That one left its mark on me, and on Harlan Ellison as well, because we both were on the thresholds of our own careers then, Harlan almost nineteen and I six months younger, but neither of us had quite managed to make that first sale yet—and here was this newcomer, this bright kid Nydahl, whom we both had met through the channels of amateur science fiction publishing, vaulting past us both and selling a story! (As it turned out, it was his first and last sale; he opted for an academic career instead. But he turned up, retired now from university life, at the 2001 World SF Convention, and for all I know is planning to return to writing science fiction after an interruption of half a century.)

The list of early starters stretches on and on, longer than I have room for—Michael Moorcock, Tom Disch, Brian Stableford, Mark Geston, Stephen Donaldson, etc., etc., etc., etc. Not everyone, of course, who sets out to be a precocious science fiction writer makes the grade right away. Ursula K. Le Guin, for example, was an utter failure as a prodigy: she sent a story to John W. Campbell's *Astounding* when she was eleven, in 1950, got it rejected, and struggled through a terrible decade of unpublishedness before breaking in, finally, at twenty-three by selling a short story to the long-vanished magazine *Fantastic*. I understand that she's done fairly well since then, however.

But science fiction remains as hospitable to eerily youthful writers today as it was in Gernsback's time. Even now, I suspect, some glinty-eyed ten-year-old is stuffing a manuscript into a manila envelope addressed to Mr. Gardner Dozois, The Editor, *Asimov's Science Fiction*—and with that precocious submission, what future Hugo winner, his or her hour come round at last, slouches toward *Asimov's* to be born? ❍

RED GIANTESS

Swollen, red-faced,
the sun gathers up the planets.
"Come on," they hear, "Mother's tired,
and it'll be dark soon."

—Steven Utley

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THE CONVERT

Simon Ings

Simon Ings, a British novelist and science journalist, works in London, climbs sea cliffs in Devon, and walks in Scotland. He tells us he is currently "writing an ungainly state-of-the-nation novel called *The Idealists,* and a slimmer, somewhat more elegant book about eyesight."

Professor Sylvia Florianopolis didn't particularly care what senses she invented, as long as they worked. The medium was all: the message could look after itself.

Throughout her career, she had fashioned any number of eyes, each fashioned with complete cynicism to appeal to whatever group she happened to be talking to.

At a fringe meeting during the Kyoto environmental summit, for example, she said something like this:

"*Homo sapiens* has evolved to take note of visible threats but to disregard invisible ones. We fear fire, but we treat exhaust fumes—which are, in their way, just as lethal—with total complacence. How different our reactions would be if we could actually *see* particulate concentrations in the air!

"Or hear, maybe, the fluctuations in ultra-violet radiation caused by the thinning of the ozone layer. What if high concentrations of carbon dioxide caused a frightening ringing in the ears? What if the oxygen given off by trees smelled of something delicious—of bacon, or honey?

"If we could actually *sense* more of our surroundings, imagine how differently we would treat our planet! Imagine how much more quickly we would act to heal the damage to our environment! We would then, each of us, be in the position of the astronauts who have looked back upon the lonely orb of the earth, and tell us how very thin and delicate—and *precious*—our world of air and oceans really is."

Very laudable.

Jarvis rolled up outside my house in Parque Lage, beating out a bumptious tattoo on the horn of his Hertz rental.

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"Off we go! A breath of sea air will do you a world of good!"

There was no stopping him. When he opened the trunk to stow my luggage there was already a windbreak and a parasol in there, and something that looked suspiciously like a child's boogie board.

"A welcome break!"

A mudslip outside its western mouth had cars backing up bad-temperedly through the Túnel Dois Irmãos. It took us over an hour to get out of Rio. But Jarvis's good humor was unassailable. He wound up the windows against the burnt-sugar smell of Gasohol exhaust, and thumbed a Counting Crows CD into the player. He set it to replay and replay. It was his theme song.

Sometimes I slept, only to wake to some surreal image and the same twanging middle-eight on the stereo. Telephone wires running alongside the road made convenient perches for vultures: there they sat, shoulder to shoulder over the highway, waiting for an accident. Further out of town, school kids squatted by the road beside boxes overflowing with starfuit, sharon fruit, artichokes. By the time you noticed them you were already half a kilometer away—how did they ever trade?

"There!"

I started awake.

"Horse!"

"What?"

"Horse!"

There it was, by the side of the road. It was dead. The heat had blown it up like a balloon. Its legs were locked straight. It looked like a polystyrene model, knocked down by the wind.

"Thanks for that, Graeme. Just watch the road, will you?"

It was good advice. The highway curled past the first village, there was a loud bang, and the car jolted into the air. I hit the seatbelt so hard it felt like I'd been struck across the body with a pole. My head whipped about like a bladder on a stick. The car landed. Graeme's foot was already pumped full on the brake: a reflex action he didn't have time to undo. The car squealed and swerved. Somehow, he managed to control it.

"What the—"

"Speed bumps."

"What?"

"Speed bumps. On a highway!" Jarvis was grimly apologetic. "I saw the signs, I just didn't believe them."

I was too shaken and surprised to give him a hard time about it. Every village had them. They were vicious, too. Even at thirty mph, it was like hitting a curb.

To Conor McVaugh—she had no idea how well her words would dovetail with his obsessions—Sylvia said something like this:

"For a long time, we didn't understand how money moved. As soon as the world's money markets were globalized, however, and could be mapped upon a single Reuters screen, we could at last see what we had long suspected—how individual transactions trigger major movements of capital from one side of the globe to the other. Downturns, upswings, crashes, booms—in an unregulated global market, money responds sensitively to the tiniest perturbations. Money flows. It spins and dances."

About fifty kilometers out of Rio, the road threw off all its earlier preten-

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sions and became an irregular track, winding between coastal hills. There were no painted markings, and the few reflectors there were stood so proud in the road, they were more of a hazard than a help.

The road had no set width, but pulsed irregularly as we drove, sometimes spreading like batter across the dusty verges, elsewhere reduced to a single lane by mud-slips and encroaching vegetation.

Even the villages had a here-today, gone-tomorrow feel. Columns of soot and smoke rose up from the dense forest like the signatures of charcoal-burners. Only the silvered crowns of the chimneys revealed the actual nature of the smoke: a cementation plant here, a refinery there.

Jarvis's driving had become so circumspect since the speed bump, that I hardly noticed how draggy the car was getting. Finally, he announced we had a flat. We pulled to the side of the road.

We got out. The sun stung my delicate eyes.

Jarvis emptied the trunk and put up his parasol.

"Graeme—?"

"There you go."

It was yellow with green piping—the colors of the Brazilian team—and every panel had a posterized image of a player on it: Santos, Assis, Sissi. . . .

"Thanks," I said, sinking cross-legged into the circle of shade.

Even through RayBans, my eyes took time to adjust. I stared away from the sun, across the narrow valley we had climbed. At the valley mouth, a town came slowly into focus—a handful of breeze-block cubes separated by wide dirt thoroughfares. A stream, rushing down through obscuring vegetation, emerged at the edge of the town, and was canalized through a storm drain. Old men sat fishing on the banks. You'd be lucky to catch anything as large as a sardine from a stream that tiny. But for those who had nothing, this was as restful and dignified a way of obtaining food as any other.

I watched in silence, a little disconcerted. I had spent so many weeks now fixated upon the urban rich, Rio's players, its movers and shakers. Now, confronted with these men who had no money to make them shine, I saw them as mere shadows, or flat cut-outs.

No money-glow broiled like a living tattoo across their lined black faces. No sparks leapt from their skin. Unaccommodated men, they were invisible to my new organs of sense.

They hardly moved. Patient, old, they seemed as vegetable as the trees. How well they suited the dusk, the dull brown earth, the dull brown water!

The hunt for Conor McVaugh had consumed Professor Sylvia Florianopolis; it was the dominant trope of her bizarre and checkered career.

Sylvia had launched her personal odyssey from Tufts University in Massachusetts, a front-row, hand-in-the-air, apple-for-the-teacher groupie of the celebrated philosopher of mind Daniel Dennett. Dennett, you must understand, is an American. American philosophers talk of the mind as though it were a machine. It's not that they lack poetry. But they are the products of an automotive culture, and consequently they get nervous around things they can't take apart and fix.

(Sylvia dreamt. Fuel injection. A fatter exhaust pipe. Zero to sixty. A brain in a bucket-seat. Consciousness on a competition ride-pack.)

At the time of writing, Dennett is director of the Center for Cognitive Studies. Dennett wrote *Content and Consciousness*. Dennett knows what a metaphor is; he knows when something stands in for something else.

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Sylvia didn't.

(That's what a teacher finds so galling: it is the things his students misconstrue that lead them by strange paths to greatness.)

Sylvia Florianopolis graduated, made a drunken pass at the great and greatly bemused man, and, snubbed and embarrassed, applied elsewhere for her postgraduate studies. She left Tufts determined that if the brain were a machine, she would be the first to bolt on some tasty accessories.

She came to London and lectured for a while at King's College. (I missed her by three years.) She told me once that the train home to her digs in Crystal Palace took her through a junction raised on low brick arches. Below, in the Y formed by branching lines, lay a Cosworth engine shop, botched together out of breeze blocks and corrugated iron. Fortysomething boy racers went there to have their Ford Escorts breathed upon. A sign on the roof of the workshop, level with the train windows, read: "COSWORTH: satisfying your lust for power."

It was sundown by the time we reached Mangaratiba, with just time enough to board the last ferry. The resort island of Ilha Grande is too small for vehicles, so Graeme drew us up in the long-stay parking lot. We tottered as best we could to the quay, laboring under the weight of our bags. A crowd of locals and backpackers was just starting to board.

Graeme and I stretched out near the prow. The sea, resting in the lee of the island, was as still as an aquarium. The coast was a series of inlets surrounded by steep, jungled mountains, now green, now gold, now black, in sunlight as rich as the flame of a candle.

It was dark by the time we reached the island. The harbor town, such as it was, was set back from the beach by a line of upturned fishing boats. On a hill above the town, embers the color of baked apples wove like worms in the trees, and the air resonated yellow, as with the striking of great bells.

Conor McVaugh—my new eyes told me—was already home.

Science is as science is paid to be. Science is a trade. It is not, never has been, never will be, pure. Science answers questions it is paid to answer; that is all—and no one saw the point in paying Professor Sylvia Florianopolis more than a few empty compliments, for a long, long time.

Did she ever imagine that her big break would come from a man whose education, such as it was, gave him no real understanding of her work? What would she have made of her future, had she known that she would be forced out of science's mainstream and made to rely, at last, upon the tender mercies of such a rich but ignorant sponsor?

Or were all her unsuccessful bids for academic funding—her tireless yet mostly vain efforts—merely a blind? A cover, for the enormity of her ambition, as she revealed it to me, that day in San Francisco?

"All of it?" I asked, wide-eyed, my chicken molé cold and congealed, as Sylvia (her "blue" steak oozing blood into her green papaya mash) explained her bid.

"Yes," said Sylvia. "Yes. All of it."

"And what makes you think he's just going to whip out his check book and hand over everything he's worked for his whole life? Be serious, Sylvia!"

Sylvia stared hopelessly at her plate, her fork hand spooling vaguely in the air. It's a gesture you grow familiar with in academe: sometimes, people

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know too much about a subject to explain it easily. Sometimes, they can't find a place to begin.

"Orson Welles."

"Orson Welles?"

"Think *Citizen Kane*."

"It's a film," I complained, deliberately obtuse. "It's a fiction."

"Kane is Hearst. Randolph Hearst. Hearst isn't a fiction."

"Okay."

In California, the salads swim in low-fat dressing and the lettuce is a complex, fractal nettle-ish thing that tickles the gag-reflex before you get a chance to chew.

"Hearst ended his life a recluse, disconnected from the world he had a hand in shaping."

"Did he have a sled?"

"Think Howard Hughes."

I knew something of Howard Hughes—his physical courage, the curious overdriven masculinity of his films, the fear of disease that would deliver him, at the end of his life, to the wrong side of a sterile cell door.

"The rich don't *all* end up barking mad, you know," I said.

"They all end up in the same place," she said. "They all end up in the same relationship to money."

For the very rich, she said, all things are possible, but everything is not. Money cannot buy immortality, and, however rich you are, the need to choose, and make the best of time, remains.

From McVaugh's height, as from Hearst's, and Hughes', and Gates'—this was Sylvia's argument—all things appear equal. When everything is affordable, nothing seems more valuable than anything else.

When you've nothing to prove by the purchase, a Saab will take you places on a congested road as comfortably as a Bugatti, and why languish on Asprey's waiting list for your engagement ring, when Stern's is just next door?

So objects lose first glamor, then significance. Value drains away from things, and Time alone remains.

"They all get there in the end," she insisted. "More or less damaged, more or less misunderstood."

The following month, we went to see McVaugh for the first time.

The Boeing 737 redeye banked and trembled, then dropped like a stone through patchy cloud into Denver. Sylvia pinched her nose and blew, to cure the popping in her ears. She stirred uncomfortably in her seat, and attempted to get a view out of the window not dominated by the wing. She had the hunched, belligerent, asymmetric posture of someone consigned against her will to economy class.

As we taxied to the gate, she was the first to stand; she was short enough, she cleared by whole inches the bells, fans, and whistles mounted above each seat. It was several minutes before I could move, and all the time her large, unlikely breasts hung close to my cheek like an affront.

We had the briefest breath of real air as we crossed to the bus: it was as clear and healthy and tasteless as Californian cuisine. Then, in the terminal, Sylvia led me to the American Airlines first-class lounge, her tracking instincts honed by years of seizing whatever scraps of glamor came her way: the glass of warm end-of-term white, the toothpicked departmental sausage.

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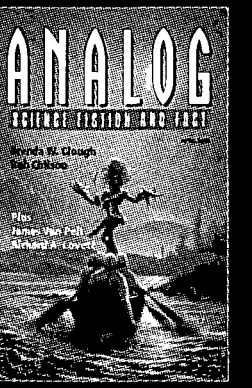

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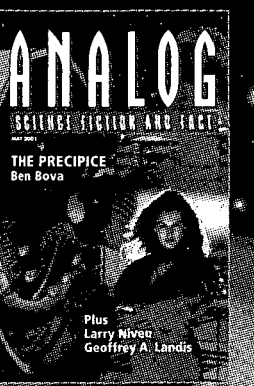

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The girl from McVaugh's private office—and she really was no more than a child—was waiting for us at the door to smooth our passage over the deep, synthetic carpet.

The location of McVaugh's cabin was a closely guarded secret. The girl issued directions to us under plain cover and insisted we memorize them as we recovered over gin and tonics. Then she tore up the map. Jaeger dress or no, she was barely of an age to be cheerleading her local football team, and I wondered cynically if all this cloak-and-dagger business were not some charade dreamed up to flatter her: "*Our great chief's life we place in your young hands!*"

Sylvia lapped it up.

"Have you got it memorized, Tom? Have you? Are you sure? Say it all back to me. No, not here, in the car!"

McVaugh's office had leased us a Cherokee. It felt as big as a tank. ("If we must drive cars as big as this," Sylvia muttered, "why can't we go back to the days of white-walled tires and chrome and fins? I *like* fins.') Still, we figured that its size was meant as a gesture of generosity: a consolation prize, perhaps, for having had to fly Tourist Class. And after all, four-wheel drive was the norm on American highways these days, with ordinary cars vastly outnumbered by cattle-barred SUVs.

As it turned out, however, the office's choice of vehicle was simply practical. We needed every gear as we churned up past the snow line, and my ears popped once with the height we had climbed, and a decompression headache brushed sooty fingers across the backs of my eyes.

"Are you okay to drive still?"

I shook my head. "We're already there," I said, and pointed to where, among a stand of firs, a man in a lumberjack fleece stood bent over the open hood of an elderly snowcat.

It was another jarring, lurching, freezing hour before we reached the ridge, and the discreet, well-made rock path that led to Conor McVaugh's home-from-home.

That, then, was the prelude to our startling interview.

"What makes a sense?" pondered Professor Sylvia Florianopolis, while opposite her, on a designer couch more expensive than the vehicle she and I had traveled up in, Conor McVaugh—entrepreneur, billionaire, icon of the New World Order—leafed through our photographs.

Something strange happened to McVaugh's face. Something ape-like emerged. The expression was familiar; several political caricaturists had captured and exaggerated it. His frown. His jaw.

I wondered about that look: the unfortunate, cretinous expression that stole over him whenever he was deep in thought. What patterns had that unfortunate tendency laid down for him at school, I wondered? What teasing had he suffered at the hands of his classmates? At kindergarten even? Was this the source of his over-achievement? Could it be that his empire was driven by his need to prove his playground enemies wrong? Men like McVaugh—achievers, visionaries, despots—they acquire their demons very young.

"What makes sight 'sight,' smell 'smell'?"

Sylvia might have handed McVaugh a package of pornography, the way his mouth had set, and the tension had found its way even to his fingertips: I saw that he had begun to bend and dent the photographs as he leafed

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through them. Hardcore, vicious, haunting: he tore his gaze away from them.

"Briefly," Sylvia went on, oblivious, "there are three components to any sensory perception. First, a physical phenomenon—light, say. Second, a *sense organ*—in this case, an eye—which the light affects. Of course, evolution has been pretty parsimonious about what she lets us see of the world. The human eye is adapted to capture a useful but actually relatively narrow segment of the spectrum. And every sighted animal, according to its specific survival needs, has access to a different bandwidth. None of us—no species—gets the full picture."

There was something curious about Sylvia's style of delivery; her pedantry had a saving, surreal quality. "Every sighted animal" was very good. But McVaugh's own eyes—when we met him, the cornflower blue of a hundred business magazine covers—had since acquired a smoky quality, as though our pictures had stained them.

Perhaps they only reflected the weather. Clouds had blown up from the foot of Mount Elbert, dirtying the cold clear Colorado air. More a glass wall than a window, the north-facing side of the cabin gave out on the sky through a wide, raw-boarded Western-style porch. The whole residence was an unhappy collision between American Country and Scandinavian open-plan, and might have been snatched wholesale from the climax to *North by Northwest*.

"You said three elements," McVaugh reminded her.

"The third component of sensory perception is the brain. Dedicated areas of the brain take the raw data received by the organ of sense, and search it for pattern and order. From that comes the model."

"The model?"

"Your model, my model—whomsoever's—of what the world is like. We only have models, Mr. McVaugh. From the little data granted us, we extrapolate a model of the world. This we call 'reality.'"

Conor McVaugh picked up the photographs again. He pawed through them, clumsily, and came up with Milo, a German Shepherd, his eyes wired to a London University mainframe.

"We wired him as a pup," said Sylvia, "before his eyes could see. Dogs are born blind. We gave him other eyes, and he grew into them."

"The dog adapted to the feed?"

"Quite well."

"*Quite* well?"

Sylvia shrugged. "We were feeding it weather data from the London Weather Center. Whenever it sensed a big storm on the way, it barked."

McVaugh shook his head—whether from wonder, or confusion, or dismay, I couldn't tell.

"A kludge, I admit," Sylvia persisted. "Bijker's new neuroplastics give better results. With them, we can build new centers in the brain. Brand new optic lobes, for different kinds of eyes. . . ."

Graeme and I made our own way up the hill to the villa. Conor McVaugh greeted us at the door. There was no one around: no secretary, no security.

McVaugh shone brightly, dazzling my manufactured senses. He made us caipirinhas and insisted I stay at his villa on the hill: he was trying to be hospitable.

But it was hard for me to get to sleep with McVaugh, that illustrious financier, slumbering away in the next room, pulsing and tolling like a great

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yellow bell. And when I woke the next morning, the taste of iron filings on my tongue was enough to bring on nausea.

I focused as strongly as I could on my God-given senses, thinking to suppress my new ones by force of will. But there was little enough for my ordinary senses to take in: a pleasant, white room with cheap rustic furniture; a shower unit in one corner with a plastic curtain pulled back to reveal the water heater: a lethal cat's cradle of exposed wires and Heath Robinson pipework.

From the living room came the stomach-jolting thump-thump of *surda* drums. They were stadium sounds. Graeme Jarvis, I decided. Graeme, and his bloody football fetish! I tried to ignore the noise pouring from the TV, but the frantic rhythms of the commentary wouldn't let me go—every time I closed my eyes I found myself hyperventilating. I tugged the pillow from under my head and held it over my ears. The bass syncopations of the *surdas* played games of counterpoint with my pulse.

Cursing, I crawled to the side of the bed and let myself gently down onto the floor. The shower was a short crawl away. Sitting there, if I really strained, I could just about reach the faucet.

When the downpour became too hot to bear, I crawled out of the shower and left it running so the steam might soothe my dry throat.

I opened the bedroom door.

There was no sign of Graeme. Conor McVaugh was sitting in a sofa chair watching the TV. The front door was open, and in the light streaming in off the dirt road, his exposed forearms and balding skull had the smooth pallor of margarine. He turned. His jeans were faded Levis. His eyes caught the light oddly—he was wearing lenses. "I hope I didn't wake you?" His voice had a creepy, passive-aggressive quality, like Andy Warhol.

I shook my head.

It occurred to me that I was naked.

McVaugh turned his attention back to the TV. Vasco were playing Fluminense. Where was Graeme?

McVaugh sank deeper into the upholstery and slung his leg over the arm of the chair. His toenails needed cutting.

I closed the bedroom door on him and went and lay down for a while. I must have fallen asleep. When I got up again it was around noon. The TV was silent.

McVaugh, though, hadn't moved.

"Hi," he said.

I closed the door again and threw on some clothes.

Two philosophers, George and Bill, meet in the market place one afternoon. It is Bill's birthday—

GEORGE	Hello, Bill. Happy birthday!
BILL	Why, thank you! What's that you've got there?
GEORGE	This? This is your birthday present.
BILL	Really? How thoughtful. What is it?
GEORGE	It's something to help you keep track of money.
BILL	Ah, George, you know my bad habits too well! What is it, a pocket book?
GEORGE	It's a bit more than that, Bill. With this, you will be able to see where money goes. Wherever you are, you will see it spinning and dancing. And not just your money: all money, everybody's money, will be visible to you.

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BILL — But how? How can anything possibly trace all of Money's many highways and byways?

GEORGE — I can see this is going to take some explanation—

BILL — I somehow knew it would come to that.

GEORGE — Now stop complaining, and go fetch us a map of the world—better make it a big map—some thumb tacks, and some thread. . . . Excellent! Now, stick a pin into the map at every place where money changes hands. A pin for every shop, company, residence, computer terminal, cashpoint, EFTPOS machine, and telephone.

BILL — That's a lot of pins.

GEORGE — You're not wrong there. Now—all done? Good. Now, imagine a financial transaction. Any transaction. Anything at all.

BILL — All right, then. Now, let's see: a phone call to Blooms-R-Us from a dutiful daughter in Wolverhampton, ordering flowers to be delivered to an address in Cardiff, in time for Mother's Day!

GEORGE — Thank you, Bill! Now, tell me, in this quaint little scenario of yours: where does the money go?

BILL — From the dutiful daughter to Blooms-R-Us.

GEORGE — And?

BILL — What? Oh, yes, I suppose a fair chunk of it must go from Blooms-R-Us to the Cardiff florist.

GEORGE — So take a piece of thread, and run it between the dutiful daughter and Blooms-R-Us—wherever *that* is—and from Blooms-R-Us to the florist in Cardiff.

BILL — There!

GEORGE — It's a start. You have, it is true, described the initial tranaction. But you have yet to show *where the money went*. Consider. Neither the florist nor Blooms-R-Us keep their money under the mattress. They have banks in which to store their profit; they have outgoings—phone charges and such. Mark these routes on your map.

BILL — Wait! I've run out of thread!

GEORGE — What a pity. You had barely begun. You see, Bill, Money does not stand still. It washes back and forth. It trickles down. It spreads and gathers. The task I set you—it can never end! Dispirited?

BILL — I'll say!

GEORGE — Well, let's have another try. Only this time, let's make a map of our own—out of living skin!

BILL — You know, George, a pocket book would have been more than . . .

GEORGE — Come along, Bill, don't be so squeamish! Now, prick your map with a pin where the Dutiful Daughter resides. Now prick it where Blooms-R-Us answer their phones. Prick the florist's shop in Cardiff. Prick the florist's bank. Prick the florist's bank's telephone company. Prick the telephone company's cleaning contractor. Prick, prick, prick, on and on and on, following Money's spread and flow, until you cannot stand it any more.

Stand back—and be amazed.

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Because you made that map of skin, and because that skin is packed with nerves, your map can *learn*.

Taught the way that money flows, nerves can imitate your lessons, prick themselves and prick each other, figure how the pattern shapes until—

Sit back, smile, and relax, you've got yourself a model of the way that Money moves!

BILL A model?

GEORGE Yes, Bill: a model.

BILL Not a definitive record, then?

GEORGE Well, no. The moment you gave off pricking the map, it was no longer connected to what money is really doing in the real world.

BILL Well, just how good a model is it?

GEORGE To start with, it was very good. By now, though, it's not so good. . . .

BILL Tomorrow?

GEORGE Way off.

BILL Oh dear.

GEORGE Shall we start again?

BILL Third and final try?

GEORGE That's right. Make a map of the world, out of skin.

BILL Okay.

GEORGE Good, now take this enormous bale of telegraph wire—

BILL Good grief!

GEORGE And connect all the places on your map to the actual physical places.

BILL But that'll take forever!

GEORGE Nonsense. Happily, the telephone and cable companies have done most of the wiring for you.

BILL Funny sort of birthday this is turning out to be . . .

GEORGE Finished? Good! Now. Whenever a transaction is made in the real world, a signal passes down a wire, and jangles the relevant nerve on your map.

This means your map will always be accurate. It will always be up to date!

It's not just a map now, of course.

BILL No?

GEORGE Indeed not. Neither is it merely a model. It's a whole lot more impressive than either map or model. . . .

BILL Or pocket book?

GEORGE Or, indeed, pocket book.

BILL What is it then?

GEORGE What you have here, my lucky birthday chum, is an *eye*. . . .

There was nothing particularly remarkable about this cottage. It was modest, modern, well-built. It had been erected with a senior police officer in mind, back when the Ilha Grande boasted Rio's Alcatraz-style high-security prison. There were the usual amenities: a well-equipped kitchen, a hi-fi, two phones. But there was nothing here to suggest McVaugh's status: no Aga range, no Shaker sauna cabinet, no Neotu rugs. It was a place even I might have afforded. It was a disappointment, to be honest.

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I went into the kitchen and made some coffee. McVaugh joined me for a cup. He winced as the burnt grounds matted his throat. "They really ought to stop exporting all the good stuff," he complained.

"I thought you had business appointments," I said.

"I cancelled them."

"How did Sylvia enjoy her grand tour?"

It was hard work, by his account.

"Where's Jarvis, anyway?"

McVaugh had consigned Graeme Jarvis to a hotel in Abraão, the island's only town.

"Is he staying on?"

Apparently, he was.

After that I gave up. It was too much like hard work. I trotted out some willing-sounding gambits, but McVaugh didn't seem in any rush for us to discuss my reports, or to settle down to work of any kind. Nonplussed, I left him to his football and his bad coffee and went off into town.

The Ilha Grande was a melancholy place. It's prison had been demolished long since. Abraão, which had once catered to the prison staff, sprawled half-empty and struggling on even the busiest nights. However many tourists the boat brought in, the town had bars and restaurants always had tables to spare. By day, stray dogs slept under the palm trees. Every dog was old. They followed you no matter how far you walked, from beach to beach, from one beaten-earth path to another. They were very friendly. Vivid blue-shelled crabs the size of dinner plates wandered from beach to tree line and back again, painfully, as though picking their way among hot coals. The dogs worried at the crabs as at some old and annoying conundrum: "it moves with volition; yet it is neither food, nor is it yet a bicycle."

Abraão had a pretty stone church. Conscious of my more-than-tourist strangeness, I did not go in. In the square outside, teenage buskers from the north of the country danced capoeira. (It's the local dance-cum-martial arts workout—the Brazilian equivalent of Morris dancing, and immeasurably sexier.) On quiet days they used a ghetto-blaster for accompaniment, but there were usually enough interested spectators around to make a live racket. One old man turned up religiously every afternoon with an instrument like a fishing rod and plucked out the rhythm for them with fingers crabbed by arthritis.

A couple of weeks in—it was Easter Sunday—McVaugh invited me to breakfast at a café on the square.

By the time we took our seats on the terrace, the town's brass band was already assembled. McVaugh watched the parishioners gather in front of the church, his smile melancholy and wistful.

The band struck up and processed around the square. The congregation followed. Many wore red sashes, reminding me absurdly of beauty contestants. Four young men in surplices bore a statue of the Virgin on their shoulders.

McVaugh turned and spoke Portuguese to the waiter. He turned to me. "Do you want a drink?"

"I've got my coffee."

The waiter brought McVaugh pastis and a jug of water. McVaugh held the clear spirit up to the sun and clouded it with a little water: a private ritual. He drank a third of it off and set the glass down.

"Ex-correction officers," he declared. "Retired policemen. Restaurateurs.

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The jail—their whole reason for being here—lies in rubble on the other side of the island. But still this community hangs on, year after year; it still observes its saints' days."

McVaugh was off on one of his *Little House on the Prairie* jags.

"In my country," I said, "we call this magical bonding force 'tourism.'"

McVaugh shot me an odd look. "How are the eyes?"

He meant, specifically, my extra sense.

"You're the only man here they see," I told him.

McVaugh was bright. Loud. Redolent. Pressing. He was Louis XIV. He was the Sun King. He was the sweetest jazz riff the Duke ever blew. He was Hockney's most transparent pool.

Blah, blah, blah.

Sylvia's surgical team has reached into my brain with slim, computer-guided whiskers, and licked her unimaginably expensive artificial organ, like a postage stamp, deftly against my amygdala. There it clings to this day, quite undetectable during any ordinary medical procedure. Even the hole in my skull is sewn over with an invisible mend.

But were you to ask me what my new sense is like—well, how do you describe sight to the blind?

Quite.

I cannot describe the experience of it, this unique sense of mine, except in the stunted and ambiguous language of sensory metaphor: "seeing," or "hearing," or "feeling," or "smelling." You must understand that these words are merely phatic. The exact language to convey my new sense has not yet been invented.

"I thought this place would be restful for you," McVaugh said. He spoke knowingly. As though he too, in some muddy, intuitive way, could see how money moved, and had to escape such insights from time to time.

Every cent of his two hundred billion dollars! The first day we met him, that's what we asked for. Why should we bid for any less, now that we had come this far?

McVaugh held Sylvia's gaze. This was chutzpah on a level he'd never seen before; in his most outrageous imaginings even, he'd surely never contemplated this.

Was that really a smile playing on his lips?

"A drink, I think," he muttered. He stood up, but his stained and troubled eyes did not quite connect with ours. He asked us what we wanted, and crossed the room to pour.

The interior of McVaugh's Colorado eyrie was pure WASP, more a Ralph Lauren show home than a real, lived-in space. I wondered how often his business commitments allowed him to escape here. For the very rich and the very famous, time by yourself is the most expensive luxury of all.

The bottle tinked against the glass. Scraped. Rattled. I sat up, camouflaging my gesture by making a space for my drink on the low, paper-laden table before me. But my eyes never left him. Had Sylvia seen? Obligingly, he turned and poured again; again the bottle tinked against the glass. His hands were shaking.

He was afraid of us.

He turned to us, three glasses wedged safely in his big hands, and tried once more to smile. But there were storms in his eyes.

He set the glasses down firmly on the cabinet—he had to think the mo-

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tion through, he was so shaken—and, looking neither at us nor at anything else, his eyes blue and formless as spilled paint, he launched himself blindly at the patio windows. He tugged a panel aside and strode out, coming to rest at last against the crudely finished balustrade. A balk of cold air ram-raided the room. I blinked, contact lenses chafing at my lids, and tried to refocus on our host. Leaning there, bent almost double over the beam, there was something discarded about him; something broken.

"Go, Tom," Sylvia hissed. "Tom, you go."

I stood up. I was as nervous as hell. I hunted the room, longing secretly for a way out of this, a door marked Exit; or, failing that, a prop. I lighted upon the bottle. Maker's Mark.

His glass. And mine. And out. Some comic business: jackets, the door sticking when I tried to close it. I couldn't have made heavier weather of pulling alongside him if I'd tried. But he seemed glad of the fleece, and expressed no desire to go back inside.

He said, when finally I came to rest, "You people don't pull any punches."

"I don't think the professor knows how," I admitted.

"Known her long?"

"Less than a year."

He rolled the glass between his hands. It disappeared between his big, thick fingers. He nodded at the dying light. "Over there," he said. "Shaker Lodge. Daryl Hannah stays there. Brad and Jennifer."

The wind died quickly: an audience brought to heel.

"And there—north-east from the broken point up there."

I turned to follow where he meant.

"Knox Point. Ted Turner's crowd, some minor Kennedys; Michelle Pfeiffer's kids were skiing there last year. Well—" He smiled. "They were learning."

Light had left the valley. Like this, it was a place you could not humanize, could not call beautiful, could not at all connect with thoughts of the sublime. It was empty, the snow-covered ground runneled like the wax of a dead candle, sparsely punctuated with cruel rocks and monolithic, sterile trees. Looking into that valley, I felt the poignancy of McVaugh's predicament.

These snow-choked cuts and scarps: was this the nearest he could come now to an ordinary living?

"Quite a little town," he said, "isn't it? Quite a cozy little community." He made a sound that should have been a laugh, but wasn't.

"It sounds like you've come a long way to find Pleasantville," I said. I didn't have anything against his home, or his need for privacy, or his choice of scenery; but neither did I envy it.

"I thought that was it," he said. He nodded to himself. "This is the best I ever heard."

"I'm sorry?"

"You. You coming here and just offering to *take all this away!*" Something imbecile stole over his face, as he struggled to this new understanding. "That is what you're doing," he said, "isn't it?"

I felt suddenly, absurdly confident. "That's right," I said. "That's exactly what we're doing."

Graeme Jarvis's presence on the Ilha Grande irritated me. There was no reason for him to stay, and no pressing reason why he should go. He accompanied me on walks.

"Is that a wasp's nest?"

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"Are we allowed near the prison, do you think?"
"What about the undertow?"
"Oh for God's sake," I snapped, "if you're going to swim, swim!"
He wasn't in long.
"Do you think this waterproof sun-screan is really waterproof?" "What time is it?" "Are you thirsty?" "Do you think they will sell us a beer?"
He had a knack of making this whole jungled, palm-treed, surf-tossed experience about as exciting as a wet weekend in Blackpool. I avoided him.

Conor McVaugh's company directors, looking askance at his plans to sacrifice Money upon the altar of Science, demanded some say in the running of Sylvia's project—if only for the sake of appearances.
Which landed us with the onerous and somewhat absurd task of suggesting how our work might promote McVaugh's commercial interests.
Sylvia got to do the visionary, millennial side of things. The nuts and bolts were left to her business consultant, a dapper, dirty-looking troll by the name of . . .
Enter Graeme Jarvis.
Over time, Jarvis and I developed a kind of fairground routine. Jarvis would make his introductions, then I would come on behind a backlit screen. This served to protect my identity, while at the same time triggering the Sunday-stroll-through-the-asylum curiosity of my audience. After that, I might perform any number of tricks with my "third eye."
I only had to "glance" at the audience and I could tell you who was the wealthiest person there, or who held the most senior position. Money was a sense to me now, and the longer I experienced and experimented with it, the more information I could intuit.
People no longer appeared solid to me. They were clear plastic envelopes, revealing vast, TARDIS-like interiors. If I "listened" hard, I could even hear sounds coming from inside them. People who worked in the money markets were my favorite. Inside them, high pampas crackled like tinder, and the sound of crickets permeated everything, legs furiously churning, scraping, singing: a billion insect arsonists dreaming of immolation. Management consultants contained in themselves a dreamy nocturnal reverie: they were very dark inside, with, now and again, the scuffle of burrowing things; breezes rustled the trees like the approach of gigantic predators. Bankers were the loudest and most garish. Their insides were an outrageous canopy cacophony. The complex call of parrots rode like a jazz riff over the cheep of tree frogs. Monkeys smaller than a clenched fist sang arias inside them.
Individuals no more, but in themselves whole worlds, these people sustained, in their commercial strut and thrust, whole phyla of financial life—life that only I, with my strange-adapted eyes, could "see."

For the very privileged, Jarvis took the screen away. The very ordinariness of my appearance—look, no antennae!—shocked them.
"With this we can vet personnel!" A thuggish woman from Human Resources rubs her fat calves together like a bloated mantis.
"Or observe the financial probity of staff holding positions of sensitivity and trust." Surely, he is her diminutive mate, this colorless Israeli, with his loud tie and lusterless fingernails. (Tonight, with the light on, she'll permit his thin tool its necessary investigations, then suck his face off, thin and easy as the skin on a cup of boiled milk.)

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"And," says Number Three, "we must not forget to acknowledge the intelligence possibilities!"

In truth, Number Three is thinking of herself. She imagines herself, third-eyed as I am, where's-willying a perfect mate from out the crowd, a shining sugar-daddy, sweet-tempered as her pa and just as chaste.

Bland, preppy, virginal cipher, she cuts it with these ogres by talking and walking to the beat. Ten years ago, her every other word would have been "interactive," or possibly "on-line." But fashions change, and she is a victim of, among other things, fashion. "This talent of his gives us the kind of *intuitive* data I feel comfortable with, ethically," she says. "It's positive, it's non-invasive, it's *insightful*."

Mantis Woman turns to Number Three and blinks: a speculative predator. Her eyelids seem to work sideways, in the muddled light spilling through the blinds.

"Who knows—?" so Jarvis, the pedagogue, wraps up our little vaudeville "—in the coming months, what our brave pioneer might yet learn about Money, through the strange eyes Dr. Florianopolis has bestowed?"

That, anyway, will do as a taste of my short but brilliant career as Memory Man, Count Mephisto of the X-Ray Eyes, Dr. Conundrum, delver into Forbidden and Secret Arts—or what you will.

The point is, we were content. We had what we wanted. We did what we had to do to keep people happy, and we did it with a glad heart. We were grateful, and—forget the insinuations of the press—we were cooperative.

It was *McVaugh* who moved the goalposts, *McVaugh* who called for that fatal moratorium. You can say what you like about Sylvia's influence over him—God knows, I'd probably agree with you. But let's be clear about this: *the Ilha Grande was his idea.*

And at the time, it made perfect sense.

You see, we'd been generating mountains of technical data, but these only referred to the mechanics of my new sense organs. McVaugh had bought into the project to know what I would *perceive* through those organs.

And those new perceptions of mine were, of course, no different in kind to what I heard, or felt, or smelled, or saw. They were entirely personal to me, and conveyable to others only by language. McVaugh had decided, therefore, that he should discuss them directly with me.

During my stay on the Ilha Grande, McVaugh interviewed me about what I had seen with my new eyes; I told him, as honestly and simply as I could, what I made of it all.

Those through whom money passes glow with pecuniary light. Shoppers incandesce, erupt and shower; bed down round home time, white-hot embers, bearing goods, luminous with purchase afterglow.

Every house is lit by money's radiance. Houses are factories where people turn income into expenditure, an hour's overtime into an extra lamp in the bedroom, an annual raise into a new TV. Rent, ground rent, sub-lease, mortgage, rates, utilities. Consumption soars and dials spin. Houses are mills where sweat is ground to light.

But McVaugh, it turned out, was not really listening. He had his own ideas about what I was supposed to have discovered.

"Yes, but—what has Money *become*, Tom? Give it your best shot!"

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What did he want of me? The usual market-animist guff? "I've told you what I see, Conor."

"But what do you *make* of it?"

I shrugged. "It's a kind of weather," I said, "I suppose."

This was one of the reasons his management had taken such an interest in us: Sylvia had sold them on the idea that I would be a kind of weather forecaster for Money.

Mind. Weather. Money. In her highly confidential lecture series to McVaugh's management team, Professor Sylvia Florianopolis had developed this dodgy analogy into the central tenet of a new faith.

"In the beginning, money just jiggled about in people's pockets. Since about the 1940s, however, it's been acquiring a substrate—a physical environment in which to grow and develop, and, yes, evolve. . . ."

McVaugh attended every one of these sermons. He flew Sylvia about in his private jet. He put her up in the apartments his companies leased for him across the globe, or, where there was no private residence, he booked them adjoining rooms in expensive hotels.

"The environment I'm talking about is the *computer*," Sylvia would say, very slowly, as to children. "The computer is Money's growth medium. Each year we've seen this medium grow more and more solid, more and more internally consistent, until today, finally, we can best understand money, not as a mere system of human exchange, but *as the emergent property of an electronic life-form*. The world's web of servers, data cores, and satellites has become a kind of brain, and financial transactions move through that brain *the way ideas move through you*."

Philosophy 101: Beware the metaphor. Beware especially the metaphor that seeks to anthropomorphize that which it seeks to explain.

And Sylvia was taught by the best; she had no excuse.

I believe she did it deliberately. Not at first—but later. In the end, she knew precisely what seeds she was sowing. And by then, Conor McVaugh could no more have dropped our project than a terminal cancer patient could have ignored the dangled promise of just one more clinical trial.

"Tell me about Money, Tom. What's it like?"

There was no way I could persuade McVaugh that Money was not alive. He had spent too many years stubbing his toes against the markets not to believe they had a character all of their own. And, to an extent, he had a point: whether we think something is alive or not is largely a question of scale. DNA sits at the very core of living things, but watching a strand of it in action is about as exciting as watching a zipper come unraveled. It's so obviously not alive—so how can *we* be?

At the other end of the scale, the Earth seems full of separate things, some living, some not: but from space, you can see how the whole planet works together: how even rocks and air and clouds are part of a living process.

So who was I to say that money—on a global scale—did not pulse with life?

The trouble was, Sylvia had carried Conor much, much further down metaphor's primrose path.

"Conor, even if Money were alive, that doesn't make it *conscious*."

Graeme Jarvis coughed: a modest interruption. "Tom," he began, "might it not be that Money is *conscious*, while not necessarily being *alive?*"

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We stared at him.

"Well?"

Graeme had run into us in a gift shop in Abraão. I was looking for something to send to my wife. I don't know what I was thinking of. Maybe I imagined that I could pass my long and controversial absence off as an adventure, a sudden *wanderlust,* a premature mid-life crisis. *"I found this intricately carved parrot on the Ilha Grande. It'll look great in the conservatory. Missing you already. Home soon, T. xxx"*

"Oh Tom, look at the ironwork fish, she'll like that!" Suddenly Jarvis was helping me shop. Jarvis offered his help in such a way as to make people feel as powerless as possible. "You'll need to pack it very carefully. Shall we get some padding? Where shall we get that, do you suppose? Maybe the mainland. We could go to the post office in Mangaratiba. Is there a post office there, do you think?"

I was just about to send him away with a flea in his ear when McVaugh rolled in wearing RayBan shades and tripped over a pile of straw hats.

"Is anyone hungry?" Jarvis piped. And: "Look what Tom's buying, Mr. McVaugh!"

So now we were eating palm-heart pizza by the waterfront, and Jarvis seemed hell-bent on confusing McVaugh even further. "After all," he tittered, "there's little enough difference between weather patterns revealed by a satellite photograph and thought patterns revealed by a PET scanner."

McVaugh dropped his fork. There was a terrible light in his eyes. "Tom, is that true?"

I knew what McVaugh wanted, of course. It's what we all want, deep down. He wanted someone to come along and tell him that the shape of his life wasn't his doing. He wanted someone to put all the blame for his disappointments and wrong turnings on someone or something *else*.

So, at the end of his youth, as he eked out his lonely existence in a series of glorified hotel rooms in the world's most obscure backwaters, as lonely as any hobo, McVaugh had decided to blame Money. Money was his adversary. Money was the trickster who had led him to his present, sterile pass.

He had Money in his sights now. Money with a capital M. The whole dumb, sprawling ecology of it. The creature into which I was plugged.

I read the papers. I watched the news. I knew, now, why McVaugh's "flame" was dying, why the tolling of the great yellow bell was fading in my "ears," and why even Jarvis, presenting his MasterCard to the teenage waiter that night, lit up "brighter" than McVaugh, the richest man on earth.

The press had got hold of how much of his own money McVaugh had invested in Sylvia's project. The stock value of both his companies had plummeted.

The better known half of his empire, Dreyfuss BioLogic, was soon subject to aggressive takeover bids, and did not survive the year.

The less glamorous, less volatile half—Achebe Holdings—persisted. McVaugh's supporters praised the swift and decisive action he took to save the company.

He'd sold it.

So what does this make us?

McVaugh's article in *Time* magazine a few weeks later could not have

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been more ill-judged. He must have written it in Abraão, while Jarvis and I were there. It's full of half-remembered particles of our conversation.

We are mere cells. Money's brain cells. Neurons that all together make up Money's mind.

Could he not see how he was being set up? Did he not realize that it was not the quality of his thought, but his name and his fall from grace, that had attracted the editors? Could it have escaped him, in his dreamy-eyed egomania, that media all over the world were waiting with bated breath for him to damn himself out of his own mouth?

Imagine it: Charles Foster Kane builds his opera house, then strides onto the stage *himself* and begins to sing.

Rent a car. Pay into a pension plan. Buy your wife-to-be a ring, your child a Disney hat. Withdraw fifty with a stolen credit card and score some smack. Sell grandma's shares, bankrupt a bank, lease a yacht, buy a car, sell a lawn mower. Pay a phone bill. Money doesn't care. It's just a transaction to Her. An event. A blip. A byte. A "0" or a "1." You can break the bank in Monte Carlo, or pledge your child's nest-egg to a TV evangelist—it's all the same to Money. You're a one, or a zero, there are billions of you, and whatever thoughts you collectively make in Her head, they're not your thoughts—they're Hers.

When I read that, I caught the first ferry and took myself off to Parati on the coast, a few miles west. I couldn't bear the thought of running into McVaugh: his quizzical, expectant smile, his abstruse speculations, his otherworldly gaze. Watching Sylvia's religion take root in him was like watching someone slashing their wrists in slow motion.

On the ferry, I suddenly had this vision of him talking to Graeme Jarvis; Jarvis smiling, nodding, encouraging, confusing him; Jarvis suggesting another article, and another, and another; Jarvis taking him in hand and leading him into the sea; Jarvis, baptizing him in Sylvia's new faith.

"Beba Coca Cola" was the instruction stenciled on every table-top in every bar in Parati. So I did, fortifying it with rum and, later, cachaça. After a day or so, I relented and phoned in, to let them know I was all right.

Jarvis wanted to help. Jarvis always wanted to help.

"Fuck off back to London," I said.

Which begs the question, Why didn't I fuck off back to London with him?

It had to do with my extra sense. My money sense.

Senses are more than dispassionate receptors. Every one of your senses is finely tuned to the world of human affairs. Your sense of smell is heightened by the subliminal odor of a mate. Your ear filters out noise to hear a catchy tune or a voice uttering your name. Your eyes, too, are finely tuned to read the human landscape. There's a gyrus in the brain called the fusiform gyrus, for example, which lets you recognize and remember faces. (If yours ever got damaged, everyone would look the same to you—a rare but well-documented condition called prosopagnosia.)

But what of my new sense? There was nothing human about it. There was no syntax, no grammar, to Money. It was data, merely—a bestial shriek, a shiver as your nail scrapes down the blackboard, the pungent reek of smelling salts, a blinding strobe-light. . . . (Pick a metaphor—pick any metaphor.)

It scratched me raw.

The truth was, I was afraid to launch myself back into the world of money. I was afraid of it as I have always been afraid of the water, and for the same simple reason.

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I feared that I would drown.

So when, a couple of weeks into my sulk, McVaugh contacted me and asked me to return, I did as he asked. The Ilha Grande was full of delightful distractions—I figured one might as well be marooned there as anywhere. Besides, I was lonely.

"Let me teach you to swim," McVaugh said, the day I got back. He was trying to be friendly, to mend fences.

"I really can't swim," I said, with a shudder. "My dad tried to teach me when I was little, but it never stuck."

"It's just a question of being relaxed. I'm very patient."

I laughed. "If you only knew how many people have said that to me."

He shrugged and drained his glass. (We were sitting at our usual café opposite the church.) I could see that he was hurt; that he was trying, in his masculine way, to forge a bond between us.

The waves slapped my chest.

"Now, Jump forward!"

Drink had laid its load around his belly and his legs, but McVaugh was still very fit. In his swimming trunks, he looked like something out of a Fifties holiday brochure.

I made a sound half-way between a laugh and a shiver.

"Come on!" He tightened his grip on my wrists and stepped back, pulling my feet from under me. I snapped my head back to keep it out of the water and peddled furiously, hunting for the bottom.

"There you are!"

McVaugh had told no lies: he was as patient as a saint.

We weren't alone on the beach. Four teenagers from Abraão were drinking Brahma Cola at a wattle drinks stand. Curious, they had come over to see what we were up to and McVaugh chatted with them in fluent Portuguese. They cheered and laughed a while, willing me on, then grew bored and wandered away. Behind them, blue butterflies skirted the forest like sparks thrown from a vast, silent engine. The foliage was so dense here, it looked more black than green.

"Come on then, Tom. Try again. Try and kick, this time."

I took hold of his arms. This was my thirtieth day of trying. Like I say, he was very patient.

"To me." He stepped backward.

I clung. I snapped my head back. I peddled. I found my feet again.

"One more time," he said. "Now kick, this time! Kick!"

The big blue butterflies played catch amongst the driftwood thrown high up the beach by a recent storm. A stray dog scampered out of the undergrowth and leapt at one, missing it by inches.

"Come on!"

Lying on my back was easier but more scary. McVaugh cradled me, his arms under my shoulders. "Lie your head against my chest. There. Okay? Comfortable?"

I kicked up enough foam, sunbathers in Mangaratiba must have thought that a whale was spouting.

Was this the limit of his ambitions for me? To be his companion, his Man Friday? I felt there had to be something more to it.

It seemed to me that he was always casting sidelong glances at me. When

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I faced him, I'd always catch the same puzzled, expectant smile on his face. He never demanded anything of me. He bought me breakfast. In the afternoon, we went to one of the island's many beaches—in the main, the ones on the other side of the island, where the surf was higher—and he would body-board while I added steadily to my girth with a string of sugary caipirinhas from the shack at the foot of the dunes.

By evening, McVaugh, obscurely disappointed, would grow sullen. Our conversations would falter. He'd grow weary of my habitual irony, what he called my "Britishness."

"Englishness," I corrected him. "There's a difference."

He'd insist that I say what I really *felt* about things, in the kind of tone of voice that makes such intimacies impossible. (There's no easier way to attack someone in conversation than to accuse them of a lack of authenticity: Rhetoric 101.)

These abrasive interviews went hand-in-hand with increasingly generous nightcaps. Whenever he started in on them, I would make my excuses and go to bed.

"I thought you British were supposed to be able to hold your drink," he'd drawl.

"Yeah. Whatever. Good night."

Deprived of prey, sometimes he would reach for the phone. It didn't make for pleasant listening.

"So where's the point in that?" he'd yell.

"So what makes that worthwhile?" he'd whine.

It was like listening to a teenager.

"And that's supposed to add to the store of human happiness, is it?"

Quite what commercial influence he had now wasn't clear. He didn't shine any more: he was as bare and unaccommodated now as all the other islanders. But, quite unembarrassed, he'd ring up people in the middle of the night and ask the most detailed questions about how this or that deal was shaping up and what moves were planned.

"And how is that supposed to help?"

"And this is something we need to acquire, is it?"

I couldn't decide if he was bored, and felt the need to stick his oar in, or whether he was disgusted with commerce altogether and just needed to give vent to his feelings. Either way, he was as much caught up with money now as he always had been.

"Tom, what does Money think about?"

"It doesn't think, Conor."

"How do you know?"

"Because thought doesn't exist in the abstract. The whole point about the brain is that it triggers *actions*. Real solid actions in a real solid world. Thought needs action. It needs a thinker. Without it, it's just pretty patterns. It's just weather."

He thought about it. He said, "What if weather is actually the Earth, thinking?"

That's how it went. Whatever argument I brought along to demolish this folly he was building in his head, he'd simply take it and incorporate it into the structure somehow.

If I'd only left him alone, his folly would have been ordinary enough: a picture of Money as a crafty, malevolent force in the world, like the figure of

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Fortune in Chaucer and Boccaccio: raising some, ruining others, endlessly and indiscriminately. But I made things worse. Bigger. Crazier.

This is why I should have left: because it wasn't the project that was driving McVaugh crazy, or anything that I had seen. I was a latecomer to the process: a witness, or at most a chorus, to his fall.

McVaugh had been crazy all along.

"Just dive into the wave!" he tells me.

Sea-water hangs off my eyelashes like a crystal curtain. The world tilts and folds itself around me. "It's too much, Conor."

Conor McVaugh laughs. He looks like a B-movie star. He has the firm jaw, the chest. Only the fat round his belly must go; that, and his clouded, troubled eyes.

"Just dive into the wave and come out the other side!"

"I'm scared!"

"Well, you either dive into it or it comes crashing in on top of you, I know which *I'd* prefer!"

"I prefer getting out."

"Oh come on, Tom!"

The breakers are rolling in five foot high.

"Come *on!*"

"I can't."

"Beyond the breakers."

"We'll never get back again."

"We can swim round the island to where it's calm."

"We'll burn to death, we swim all that way."

"The current will carry us."

"No."

"Come on."

"No. I didn't want to swim in the first place."

"Tom. Please."

I find my feet and wade out. A wave knocks me onto my knees.

"Tom?"

"Oh, leave me alone."

McVaugh got so sunburned swimming back, that if you touched his skin, it stayed white for several seconds. All the next day, he battled sunstroke.

"You're a fucking idiot, Conor."

He sat on the sofa, refusing to go to bed, so I leant him my duvet for an extra cover and fed him ice cream. God knows if that's what you're supposed to do for sunstroke, but he seemed to enjoy it. Brazilian ice cream is extraordinary. They have fruits that grow nowhere else on earth. Acerola—a berry made almost entirely of vitamin C. Cacao—not the nut, but the fruit; it tastes of lychees. Sugar apple. Murici.

"Can I have some?"

"Oh, sorry, Conor."

"You should have come with me," he said. His smile was even dreamier than usual.

"Yeah, right," I said.

"I felt the current pulling me!"

"Uh-huh."

"It doesn't go round the island at all," he said. He took my hand. There were lights in his eyes. "It goes out to sea."

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"Want a cup of tea?"

He got up and staggered to the bathroom. "Cheers," he said. "I think I might go lie down for a while."

When the tea was made, I carried it into his room. The floor in there was tiled. The sun only entered the room at the end of the day, and the terracotta was cold under my bare feet.

His Mac was on.

I looked at the screen.

He was connected via the Web to the Space Department of the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. There was nothing much to see. Maybe he was looking someone up.

I moved the mouse cursor to the top of the screen and clicked the History button. It revealed a predictable mish-mash of porn URLs and university ftps.

I clicked Favorites.

ENHANCED NORTH ATLANTIC
AVHRR COLOR COMPOSITE
NOAA SATELLITE IMAGERY
NAVAL ATLANTIC METOC COMMUNITY
CINCLANTFLT SUPPORT
NLMOC
JMV AREAS
NAVSPECWAR

Absently, I sipped at his tea.

"NavSpecWar" turned out to be a shortening of "naval special warnings." All those terrifying-sounding acronyms belonged to nothing more sinister than military weather stations.

McVaugh was sky-watching.

It was an innocent enough pastime, but incomprehensibly dull. What was it to McVaugh, what sea conditions were like in the mid-Atlantic?

"We were looking at all the wrong things."

I nearly dropped his tea.

"Don't you think?" McVaugh came and sat down at his desk. "Money!" he sneered. "Who cares about money?"

"Sorry," I said. "I couldn't resist a play."

He back-buttoned to Johns Hopkins.

"Professor Florianopolis," he said. "She told me once that she had a dog. She plugged it into the London Weather Center. It sensed storms."

"That's what she says *now*," I replied. "You should read the original papers, they're pretty inconclusive. Whatever claims she makes now."

"I have read them," he said, patting his keyboard.

Oh yes. Of course. The Worldwide bloody Web. I went and sat on his bed. My heel caught the edge of a bottle: It rolled under the bed, noisily. I didn't know whether to acknowledge it or not.

"Seeing Money—what a facile enterprise! There's so much else to see in the world, isn't there?"

"Sure," I said.

"What would *you* have liked to see? If you'd had the choice? If me and my people hadn't been so damned keen to see Money?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Magnetism. Air pressure. I don't know. There's so much to choose from."

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He drank off half his tea. "Air pressure!" It was scalding: how did he do that? "What if you could *see* pressure?" He sat forward in his chair, hands clasped: every inch the earnest student. "Barometric pressure, the movements of the air?"

"Mmm," I said.

"Have you ever gone hang-gliding?"

I shook my head.

He ignored me; he was off on an imaginary flight of his own. "Imagine sensing all that! Imagine seeing the sky lit up with information about itself ! The seas even—imagine seeing all the changes in its motion and pressure!"

"Maybe one day," I said: a parent, fielding the enthusiasm of a child. If only there were money enough, and time, there was no limit to the number of follies Sylvia might have led him into.

He wasn't listening. He stared into his cup. I imagined him reading the leaves in the bottom.

"If the sky thinks," he said, "maybe the sea thinks, too."

The next day, we ate breakfast together in the square. He didn't drink. He was very quiet, but he wasn't brooding, I remember: his smiles came easily enough.

I said, "I'm going to go back to England."

"I thought you might."

"I'm sorry we—I'm sorry the project didn't give you what you wanted."

He was gallant: he tried to let me off the hook.

"What did I want?" he said.

I remembered Mantis Woman. "Your staff were very keen on us at first."

His laugh was short and without humor. "They never had the right kind of imagination. They just treated you like this year's gizmo. A forecasting device."

"You know," I began—but I hesitated.

"Go on."

"Money wasn't ever going to be what you thought it was."

He shrugged: "It would have been nice to talk to her," he said.

"'Her?'"

"Money. Don't you know Money is a woman?"

"You've lost me."

He laughed. "Your face!"

"I never know when you're being serious or not."

"Are you coming to the beach with me?" he asked.

"Okay. What about your surf board?"

"I won't need it," he said.

We took the coast path; it was a longer walk but the trees shaded us from the worst of the day's heat. I pointed a hornet's nest out to him. He shuddered and walked on. We paused to let a crab hobble across the path. "They get into the toilets in Abraão," he said. "Haven't you seen that yet? Look before you sit."

Then he said: "When I was young, me and my older brother used to torture the neighbors' kids."

The trees gave way to low bushes, with a smell to them like over-brewed tea; then dunes; then the beach. We stopped off at the drinks stand. The woman was there already, listening to her radio. Still, he didn't drink.

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"They were French," he explained, cracking open a can of Brahma Cola. "That's why we figured we had to hurt them."

We walked to the surf-line.

"You know those jungle gyms?" he said. "The ones where you can fix the platform at any height? Well, we put that platform about a foot off the ground and we forced the boy to crawl underneath. My brother jumped up and down on the platform, beating it with a stick. And we had his little sister tied to a tree beside the playground where she could watch and I'd wrapped her in burlap and I got her convinced that once we'd beaten her brother to death we were going to set her alight."

I watched him. He didn't say anything. He looked out to sea. Slowly, his face took on a primitive, glowering cast: an ape, confronted by a monolith.

"What happened?"

His voice came from a long way away. "Nothing much. They moved down the road to get away from us. When I went to high school I got friendly with the boy."

I was still waiting for a punch-line. "Did you ever talk about what happened?"

"No. We never mentioned it."

I thought about it. "You didn't set light to—"

He noticed my expression. He laughed. "No, of course I bloody didn't!" We'd been hanging out together for so long, he was starting to pick up the British swear words. "I just remembered it," he said. "I haven't thought about that in years."

If the circumstances had been different, I'd long ago have forgotten this story of his. It was, after all, just a bit of life's shrapnel. Such unfinished stories are common—we all tell them. They never mean very much.

As things have turned out, however, I find myself spending more and more time trying to mine a deeper meaning from McVaugh's non-story.

I live in Rio now, and have come to terms—more or less—with my inchoate new sense. The project lives on, at a much-reduced scale. Sylvia and I have our fairground routine. Companies pay us good money for our forecasts (though "seances" captures the mood better). Mine is, all in all, an unusual and stimulating living.

But I never did return to England, and my divorce, when it came, was processed amicably enough, with Graeme—who else?—acting as a go-between.

(All around me as I write—I see/hear/smell it through the walls of my apartment—Money. Cashpoints fountain and smartcards spill. Petrobras and Banco do Brasil and Banco Econômico are ocean currents, deep and quick and treacherous; in Amsterdam Sauer and H. Sterns, precious stones pour from crustal vents, making new waves that, seconds later, inundate Rio's commercial shore.)

Meanwhile, in my private moments, I have been picking away at this story of McVaugh's—this tale of childish cruelty and ambiguous pardon. Examining this shred of evidence time and time again, I feel sometimes like a paleontologist, trying to extrapolate, from a fragment of fossil, the shape and tenor of a creature's past.

The best I can come up with is how hungry McVaugh was for a punch-line—some structure, some closure, some *meaning* to his life—and how ter-

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rible was his disappointment, when life—in this case, as in so many others—failed him.

(Outside my window, on the corner of the Avenida Presidente Vargas and the Rua da Alfândega, shoppers incandesce, erupt and shower. Every apartment here is lit by money's radiance. Houses are mills where sweat is ground to light.)

McVaugh was a man born at the wrong time, into the wrong business, ever to easily accept the consolations of an ordinary religion: he would always be having to make up his own. Perhaps that was why he'd imagined Money as an overarching mind, of which he was a part. And when that, too, failed to provide—well, the world is never short of seductive similes.

Enhanced North Atlantic AVHRR Color
Composite
The Restless Sea
NOAA satellite imagery
Song for the Blue Ocean
Naval Atlantic METOC Community
The Book of Waves.

Sky-watching. Sea-watching. From the right distance, everything is alive.

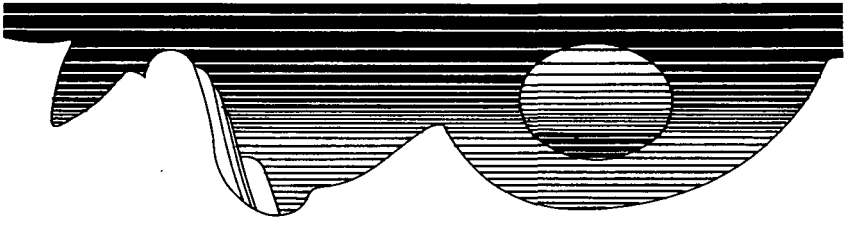
That afternoon on the Ilha Grande—the afternoon McVaugh told me his story—I remember that we undressed and sunbathed for a while.

I remember that I managed to persuade him to keep his T-shirt on to protect his shoulders. And how, after an hour or two, he pulled it off and headed for the surf. He struck out from the beach, and once he was past the surf he turned and trod water, beckoning me. I tried to join him, but I was too weak, and frightened, and I couldn't get past the first breakers. I went back up the beach and had the woman there break open a coconut for me. When I turned round and looked for him, he was gone.

A police helicopter recovered his body the next day.

He had found his current, and, for a little while, the world carried him in its thoughts.

But he was quite wrong about its direction; the current went no more than four miles east. Then it shunned the wider ocean and turned in a long, lazy loop, dashing his corpse with great violence at last on the rocks, three miles to the north of Mangaratiba. O



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CURSE OF THE IMMORTAL'S HUSBAND

When she calls him
by a stranger's name
and he complains,

when she tells him
he is her twenty-fifth husband
(or perhaps the twenty-sixth?)

and she casually mentions
countless cascades of lovers
she never chose to wed,

he loses all desire.
He sees her passing down
ages dark and light

with men light and dark
(and perhaps women too?),
and he suspects that among

this motley and vile crew,
as he envisions them,
there are at least a few

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whose bedroom prominence
looms larger than any
he could ever provide.

And he suspects that
as centuries slither past
and memories expire

he will someday be
relegated to the slippery
downside of the Bell Curve,

even his finest efforts
dismissed in the fog
of a never ending competition.

Next time she calls him
by a stranger's name
he decides to let it ride.

When she walks out the door
her thighs will be perfect.
There will be no note.

—Bruce Boston

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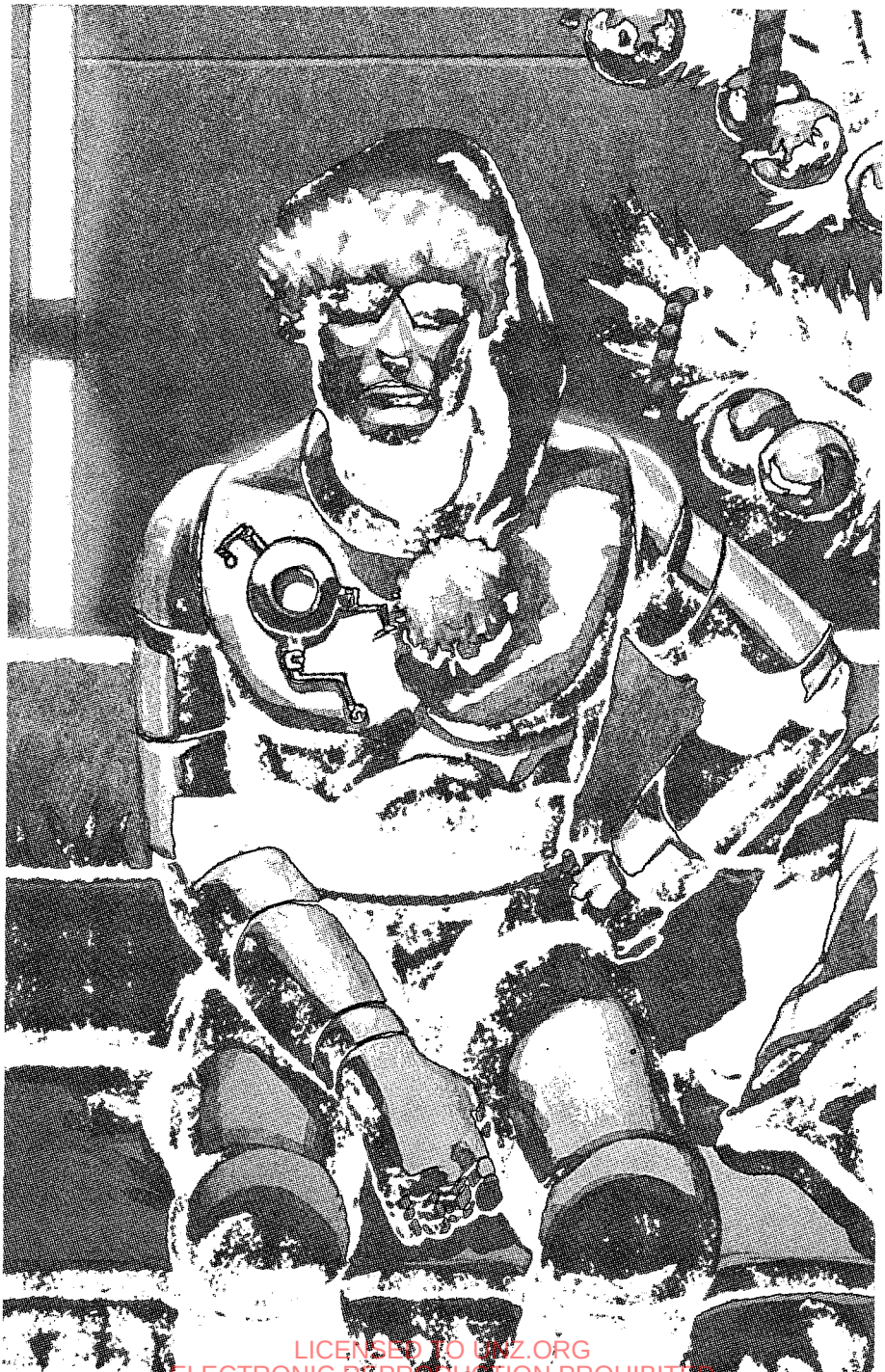

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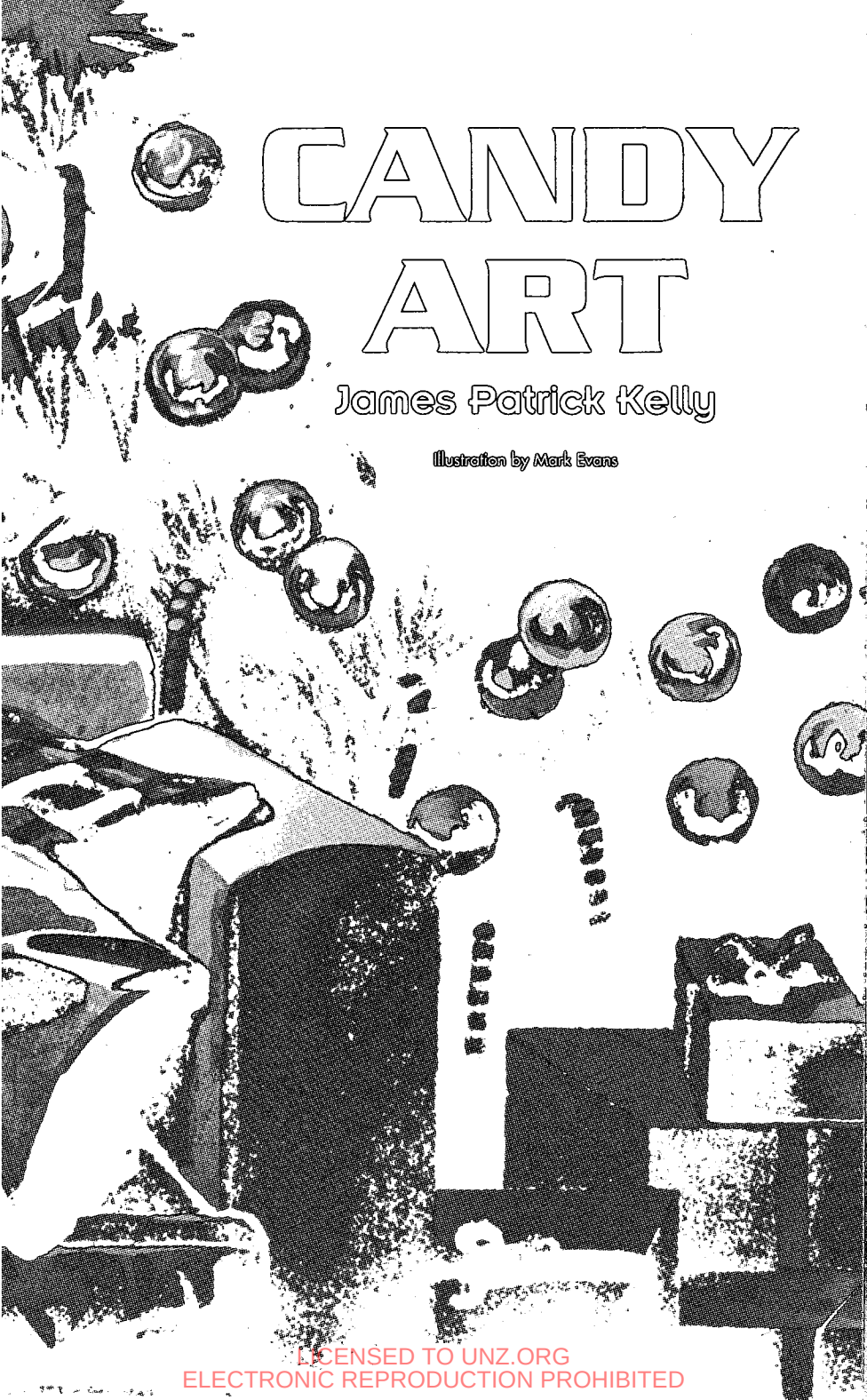
CANDY ART

James Patrick Kelly

Illustration by Mark Evans



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The author returned for the sixth time to "the summer swelter of East Lansing, Michigan, to teach the 2001 Clarion Writers' Workshop. Maybe it was nostalgia for the heady days of my youth, when I could pull an all-nighter and laugh about it over breakfast, or maybe it was the heat, but I decided I would try to write a story, too. 'Candy Art' was composed largely between the hours of midnight and two A.M. A deeply flawed first draft was completed in time for the last workshop session, thereby affording my students the chance to see the emperor, if not without his clothes, at least in his underwear. I have attempted to put their criticisms to good use. I revised this story over the course of a couple of months, and added a new scene just before I submitted it to Gardner and Sheila."

So I beep my boyfriend Mel, who hasn't been a boy since television died and ought to be more than a friend by now, since for the last five years we've shared an apartment and a bed and a dreamscape. I tell him the news about my parents.

"They want to what?" It's four-thirteen in the afternoon and Mel is downtown at the glorified closet he calls his candy lab. His hair is a bird's nest that somebody stepped on and he sounds as if he has just woken up.

"Move back in," I said. "With me. Us."

"They're uploads, Jennifer." When I first met Mel, I thought the sleepy voice was sexy. "How can they move in with us when they're not anywhere?"

"They bought a puppet to live in," I say. "Life-sized, nuskin, real speak—top of the line. It's supposed to be *my* Christmas present. Bring the family back together for the holidays and live unhappily ever after."

"A puppet." A puzzlement glyph pops up at the bottom of my screen. "As in *one* puppet?"

"It's a timeshare—you know. They live it serially. Ten hours of him, fourteen of her."

"Not fifty-fifty?"

"He's giving her the difference so he can take extra time off for his bass tournament in June."

When Mel reaches offscreen, I am certain he's about to click off. His typical reaction to bad news is to hide. Instead he produces one of his favorite cinnamon-stripe pineapple lickwixes and peels the wrapper. "How long are they going to stay?"

"They didn't say."

"Probably forever." He waves the lickwix under his nose and sniffs. "With our luck."

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"Yeah."

He isn't expecting me to agree. "You could tell them no." The panic glyph starts to blink.

"Mel."

"It's your life." He pops the lickwix into his mouth and twirls it.

MY LIFE! I want to screech. MY LIFE IS PUTTING UP WITH A PSYCHOTICALLY BASHFUL CANDY ARTIST FOR ALL THIS TIME WITH NOTHING TO SHOW FOR IT BUT A SWEET TOOTH AND DIRTY TOWELS. I'M FORTY-TWO WASTED YEARS OLD AND NOT ONLY AM I CURRENTLY SLEEPING WITH A FLAB BUCKET WHO SAMPLES AS MUCH PRODUCT AS HE SHIPS BUT NOW MY DEAD PARENTS ARE GOING TO BE MEDDLING WITH MY PATHETIC LIFE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK, THREE-HUNDRED-AND-SIXTY-FIVE BLEEDING BLUE DAYS A YEAR.

But I don't.

Instead I say, "But Mel, sweetie, it's their apartment."

For a few blessed ticks just after Mom releases control of the facial armature, the puppet is an inert thing, about as threatening as a lamp. I savor my *four, three, two, one* of sanity as the throne reloads Dad's kernel into the puppet's memory. Dad always comes up in a bad mood. He hates it that Mom leaves her wig and makeup on. She doesn't mind taking off clothes before the swap; their puppet has neither primary nor secondary sexual characteristics. But she can't stand to strip her face before she goes down.

"God damn it!" Dad grabs a handful of twinkling, gunmetal hair and yanks. The wig comes away with a loud *scri-itch*. "How did the Celtics do last night?"

"Lost," says Mel, who is spooning bananarama crunch and milk from a bowl. "173-142."

Dad tosses the wig over his shoulder. It flops onto the floor near the refrigerator and then scuttles up the wall to its place on the shelf beside the memory throne, shaking off the dust like a dog. "How about Microsoft?"

Mel taps at the kitchen table; its phosphors paint his fingertips in pale, blue light. "Up two and an eighth."

Dad grunts approval. "Now *there's* a Christmas present for you." He pushes off the throne but then totters.

"Easy, Dad," I say. "Just sit a couple of minutes, get your bearings."

"Ten hours, Jennifer. It's not like I have time to waste." He turns to catch himself on the kitchen sink, runs hot water over his outstretched hands and then scrubs Mom's blush from his face.

"Dad!" I say. "How many times do I have to ask you?" He's splashing all over the floor. "Would you please take it to the bathroom?"

"What the hell is she going for here?" Dad peers at the skin tint dripping through his fingers. "I've seen better looking Kool Aid."

Mel perks up. "You've seen real Kool Aid?"

Dad gives Mel a look that says something like *I may be dead, but I still can beat manners into the likes of you, fat boy*. But it bounces off, because Mel isn't being sarcastic. He'd actually love to talk Kool Aid with Dad. "What's that you're eating?"

"They're dry-roasted cocoa beans," says Mel, "hand-dipped in a nutriceutical banana slurry spiced with nutmeg and clove."

"Mel is submitting product to Bright O'Morn and Kelloggs." I stoop to

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wipe up Dad's spills before he slips on them. "Fortified sugar-free confections are just as nutritious as frosted flakes."

Dad sniffs. "Candy for breakfast?" If Mel developed the gumdrop that cured throat cancer, Dad would find a way to disapprove of it.

"Right. But I told you all this yesterday." Sometimes I wonder whether they installed my parents' kernels backward. "Remember?"

"Which reminds me. . . ." Mel pushes back from the table. "I'm off." He gives me a kiss on the cheek that's as dry as a roasted cocoa bean. "I'll call as soon as the samples arrive." This is as intimate as we've been since my parents arrived. It's hard enough to get Mel interested in real sex at the best of times, impossible when my mother comes staggering home at all hours, then retreats to the guest room to watch *A Christmas Carol* for the ten thousandth time or listen to Bing Crosby gargle "Silent Night." "I'm hoping I can set up the taste test for around two, but I'll call." He nods goodbye at my father and waddles through the door to freedom as fast as his stumpy legs will take him.

"He's stopping by the greenhouse this afternoon," I say. "He never shows a new food design until I taste it first."

Dad settles into Mel's chair and squints at the box of bananarama. "You call this stuff food?"

Actually, I've never been a fan of reconstituted fruit, but I'm not going to offer Dad a chance to criticize my boyfriend. "It's nutritionally complete," I say. "If you were stranded on a desert island with a boatload of bananarama, you'd never starve."

"Desert island." He makes a lemon face and tries to refill the bowl Mel left behind. Most of the yellow crunchlets find their target, but the puppet lacks fine motor skills, and maybe a dozen bounce off the edge of the bowl and skitter across the table. "There are no more desert islands," says Dad. "So what does she say about me?"

"Who?"

"Your mother." He brings a spoonful of bananarama toward his mouth, bumps his top lip but sticks his tongue out just in time to gobble them down.

"She doesn't say much, actually," I lie. "Let's see, the other day she asked whether you watched the *Tae Kwon Do Nutcracker* she recorded for you."

He crunches in silence for a few moments and then swallows. "Nothing tastes the same." He sets the spoon next to the bowl. "They said I'd be able to eat all the steak and asparagus and chili and cherry pie I wanted. Well, so what? You know what this stuff tastes like?"

"Cream cheese," I say under my breath.

"Cream cheese," he says. "But then everything tastes like cream cheese."

"So then don't bother. It always makes you mad and since you don't need to eat anyway . . ."

His gaze is hot enough to toast English muffins. I can tell he's about to snap at me, except he bites off whatever he is about to say and swallows. It goes down hard. "Tell your mother thanks," he says. "I'm glad she still thinks about me once in a while."

He gets up from the kitchen table and manages to make his way into the living room without breaking anything. What with all the shoppers, I'm going to be late for work unless I get going, so I swoop up the bananarama he dropped on the floor, empty the bowl into the garbage, wave it under the dishwasher and put it away.

"You put up the tree already?" Dad calls.

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"It was time, Dad," I call back as I stick the bananarama in the pantry and turn off the kitchen table. "We left some ornaments for you to hang." I grab my coat and slip my thinkmate from the pocket. "Mel is coming by the greenhouse for a taste test at two," I tell it as I duck into the living room to say goodbye.

Dad is sitting on the couch next to the tree. He is wearing the red felt Santa hat that was in the Christmas box under the ornaments. It's a little too big for the puppet's head and has slipped to just above the eyes.

The eyes are the best-designed part of the puppet, as far as I'm concerned. Mom can splash all the makeup she wants on the nuskin face but the only glimpses of my dead, uploaded parents that I ever get shimmer through liquid crystal depths. My father looks lost in his favorite Santa Claus hat, lost and unhappy.

"I miss her," he says. "Nothing is the same."

POOR BASTARD! I want to scream. I'D LOVE TO INDULGE IN HOLIDAY NOSTALGIA, DAD, BUT EVER SINCE YOU'VE BECOME A SELFISH MOODY JERK HIDING INSIDE A PLASTIC ROBOT, IT'S SORT OF HARD TO WORK UP ANY SYMPATHY. YOU'RE AS OUT OF CONTROL AS ALL YOUR OTHER BABY BOOMER PALS, AN ENTIRE GENERATION SUFFERING FROM FULL BLOWN EGO BLOAT. YOU PEOPLE OWN EVERYDAMNTHING AND REFUSE TO DIE AND LEAVE IT TO US THE WAY YOUR PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS LEFT IT TO YOU AND THEN YOU HAVE THE NERVE TO WHINE ABOUT HOW YOU MISS THE GOOD OLD DAYS? WHEN DO MY GOOD OLD DAYS START, YOU MISERABLE LEECH?

But I don't.

Instead I say, "Cheer up, Dad. Only eight more days to Christmas."

I keep nagging Mel to tell me what he wants for Christmas, only he acts like I'm asking him to donate a kidney. Or else he says something like, "I don't need more things, Jen, as long as I've got you." Unfortunately, that only earns him romance points from January through November; this time of year, it's just plain annoying. But I refuse to make a random buy for him. You know how some people expect you to read their minds at the holidays and then get all pouty when your best effort at telepathy results in a chrome bowling shirt or mango musk perfume? Not Mel. He's so certain that he doesn't deserve presents that he's grateful no matter what I give him.

It takes all the challenge out of shopping.

So I decide to surprise him at the lab late one afternoon. As I step up to the doorscan, I can hear him talking to someone inside, but by the time I'm through, he has washed all his windows and he's alone at his desk. He swivels his chair and tries to look like he's glad to see me.

"Jen. You startled me."

"Sorry," I say, although falling dust could startle Mel. "Am I interrupting? I heard voices."

"You did?" He shivers. "It was just a spambot."

"Good," I say. "Then I've come to take you shopping."

"Oh, no. No, I can't Jen, no. There's been a recall from Proznowski. Turns out their walnut flavor buds have peanut contamination."

"You don't use walnuts, Mel, never have." I reach over to pinch his ear. "You're coming with me, young man."

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We noodle through the crowds on Third Avenue and cross Summer Street to the pedestrian mall. Lights twinkle, doors sing carols and signs call to us. Mel, however, isn't interested in pizza ovens or scooters or fingernail computers. He passes the latest wraparounds from the Dakar String Quartet and the Boston All-Uploaded All-Star Pops without a second glance. He doesn't seem to care that snow roses are guaranteed to bloom in February or that a Quick Perk brews coffee in under ten seconds. He won't have his hair preserved or his skin tinted and he's not at all interested in a weight purge. He wouldn't book a weekend in space even if we *could* afford it. Before long I am officially desperate. I keep watching his eyes; if he looks at anything for more than ten seconds, it's his. But Mel must be suffering from some holiday-induced delirium; the shyest man in Michigan is busy grinning and nodding at people as we pass.

"A pet," I say. "I hear they've been improving lemurs."

"No pets."

A little blonde girl, all knees and elbows, is trying to skip, tug her dad's coat and gawk at Mel at the same time.

"Daddy!" Her voice squeaks. "That man is so fat!"

"Ho-ho-ho," says Mel and her eyes go round as the buttons on her coat. Dad drags her across Frazier Street. A gaggle of teenagers, twirling candy canes in their mouths, veers in front of us; they giggle and wave at someone seated in the steamy window of the Lucky Soup Shop.

"We could stop at the Virt Mart," I say, "They've ported some of the early Hitchcocks to the Mindstation."

"I'd rather dream." He squeezes my hand.

A woman pulling a folding cart full of groceries stares into the next county as she whips stiff-legged through the shoppers. Someone dressed as *Hoteiosho,* the Japanese Santa, complete with droopy earlobes and huge hairy belly, gives me a thin smile and hands me a coupon good for a free karate lesson. He looks cold. A man in a bowler hat and double-breasted topcoat mutters into the palm of his hand.

"Comfy slippers?"

"Make my feet sweat."

A lot of people are sucking on candy canes—this year's fad, no doubt. Then I see the puppets coming out of Hinckley's Hot Tub Hotel, their nuskin faces flushed. Three are dressed as women, one as a man. For a moment I think I see Mom's favorite hat, but it's only five-thirty. She wouldn't have had time to put on her makeup after the swap. Something about the way these dead people are acting turns all my Christmas spirit to ashes. They've got their hands all over one another, holding themselves up, I suppose. And they're laughing so loud that people turn and stare, which makes them laugh harder. Oh they're a riot, all right. I know what goes on at the Hot Tub Hotels of the world and all those zap parties and the Club Deads. I don't want to know but I've read all about it—we all have.

"Jen." Mel puts his arm around me and turns me away from the puppets. "You're getting that way again."

"What?" I'm ready to bite his big, fat nose off. "What way?"

"I'll tell you what I want, okay?" He walks me toward home. "A new candy aerator."

I take a deep breath. "For work?" I can't remember the last time Mel asked me for anything. "But that's not very Christmas-y. Besides, what does one cost? Twenty, twenty-five dollars?"

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"Oh." His voice gets very small. "Never mind then."

So of course everything wants to break down on one of my busiest days of the year. The Shepard Building has a bank of four elevators, but two of them gape slack-doored at the lobby. It's December 23 and I've got seventeen poinsettias, half a dozen amaryllis in full trumpet, and a pair of extra-dwarf giant sequoias, each no bigger than a liter of eggnog, squeezed onto my greenhouse cart. I make the seventh floor delivery all right but according to the invoice I've got to get to Mid-American Vocal Stylings, Suite B on twelve no later then one o'clock. Problem is that at twelve thirty-eight all the up elevators are filled with people coming back from lunch. The doors open and close I don't know how many times before some guy in a green sport coat and a Kwanza candle tie recognizes my problem and pushes three of his pals out of the cab.

"It's only one flight." He holds the door while I wheel in. "We need the exercise."

"Thanks." My blood pressure drops ten millimeters. "Merry Christmas."

The door to Suite B gives me a nod that's all business. "Welcome to Mid-American Vocal Stylings." Its receptionware looks like a red-haired woman in her thirties who is wearing a string of pearls and a Santa hat like Dad's. "How may I help you?" it says with a chirpy Michigan accent from somewhere between Ypsilanti and Kalamazoo; her *a*'s melt like butter on a short stack of pancakes.

"I've got a delivery of office plants here from the Garden of the Green Goddess."

The door pauses. "I'm sorry, Mr. Goddess, but I can't seem to find your appointment."

"I don't have an appointment," I say. "I'm making a delivery." I aim my thinkmate at its dataport and squirt the invoice at it.

The door opens. "Thanks for choosing Mid-American Vocal Stylings," it says as I wheel the cart in. In the lobby are a couple of couches wrapped in clear plastic, a low table and no plants: the front desk is deserted. I guess they're still moving in. The door closes and the redhead AI continues to pitch from the inside panel. "From the gritty streets of Chicago to Cleveland's sparkling Cuyahoga River . . ."

"Can I talk to a human being?"

". . . from the roar of the Indy 500 to the hush of the Boundary Waters, we Midwesterners have a special way of speaking."

"Okay, then." I unload plants as fast as I can. "East or west-facing windows are best, but they'll stand fluorescents."

"So when you want a business presentation that says to your client 'We're folks just like you. . . .'"

"These won't need watering until after the holidays."

". . . trust Mid-American Vocal Stylings to give your team the sound that's honest as Main Street. Ask about our . . ."

When I wheel the empty cart out of the office, Mel is waiting for me near the elevator. He is holding a bouquet of a dozen blue lisianthus and he looks as if he's about to wilt from fear.

"What's wrong?" I say. "Is it Dad?"

"It's nothing. I just needed to see you, so I GPSed your thinkmate."

"I'm working, Mel. What is this?"

"For you." He turns his head away as he hands me the lisianthus. Making

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eye contact is not one of Mel's charms. I've got a bad feeling about this. I own the Garden of the Green Goddess and my boyfriend is giving me flowers that he probably bought at the corner microbus stop. "There's something I have to tell you," he says. Sweat beads along his receding hair line.

"Mel, the van is double parked and I've got three more deliveries to make before close of business." Then I realize that he is going to break up with me. "What?"

"I can't tell you out here." He tugs me around the corner into an alcove with three vending machines: Coke, candy, and fries.

It's my parents, of course: Mom's late nights, Dad's messes. Between them, they never sleep.

Mel aims me at the candy machine. "Look," he says.

It's me—of course, it's me. He can't earn a living crafting designer candy and I can't keep my mouth shut when the bills come due.

I scan the selections absently. It's the usual mass market product—the crap that candy artists like Mel never eat: Hershey bars in dark, white, and Irish crème, Busterclusters, Fire 'N Ice, Holy Crunch, Almond Joys, Sugar Highs, and Lifesavers. What am I going to say to him? And a couple I've never seen: Red Impalas, Krazy Kanes, Fruit Squirtgums. So maybe Mel's no Rip Allgood, but I don't want to lose him. "Sweetie," I say, "I'm sorry." I glance at him then and am astonished to see him smile. He's a big man with a lot of face; his smile is not quite as wide as Lake Michigan. "I've been so frazzled lately. . . ."

Someone taps me on the shoulder. "Please, you are the deliver?"

I turn to look down on a little man in a high-collar blue suit. He's lost most of his brown hair and is pale as the moon, except for the two roses of embarrassment blooming on his cheeks.

"I beg your pardon?"

He nods three times, speaks into his thinkmate and then shows me its screen. **MID-AMERICAN VOCAL STYLINGS**. "You have not remembering few items."

"I left everything on the invoice. What items?"

"You are make a neglection of Christmas trees, please?"

I notice Mel retreating toward the elevator. He waves forlornly. I want to stop him, or at least blow him a kiss goodbye, but Mister Mid-American Vocal Stylings thrusts his thinkmate at me and points at the invoice on its screen. **2 ED GIANT SEQUOIAS**.

"Giant makes a very tallness." He holds a hand over his head, parallel to the floor. "Mostly bigger." I hear the elevator door ding.

"See this?" I point to the **ED**. "That stands for extra dwarf." I hold my hands about thirty centimeters apart. "You ordered extra dwarf. I gave you two trees but very small."

He shakes his head. "Read American all the way." He points to each letter. "G-I-A-N-T. Understand, please?"

UNDERSTAND? I want to shriek. I UNDERSTAND FINE, YOU CLUELESS BRICK. THE MOST BASHFUL MAN EAST OF THE ROCKIES HAD SOMETHING SO STINKING IMPORTANT TO SAY TO ME THAT HE CAME ALL THE WAY ACROSS TOWN EXCEPT YOU SCARED HIM OFF WITH YOUR ABYSMAL MANNERS AND WORSE ENGLISH AND NOW YOU EXPECT ME TO SNAP MY FINGERS AND MAKE A COUPLE OF TREES APPEAR TWO DAYS BEFORE MERRY FLAMING CHRISTMAS, PLEASE?

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But I don't.
Instead I say, "I'll see what I can do."

What I like best about Mel is that he's always himself in the dreamscape. No, that's not right. He just *looks* like himself: big meaty haunches, magnificent belly flop, shoulders wide enough to boost a piano. He could dream himself a swimmer's body or a boytoy's face but he never does. I used to think it was because he didn't care, but now my guess is that he believes that I like the way he really looks. Maybe he's right. Anyway, he's as comfortable when I dream him naked as when I want the top hat, white tie and tails. Comfortable. There's the difference. Mel lays a burden down when he falls asleep. If only I knew what it was, maybe I could help him carry it when we're awake.

We're tight-rope walking high above the city. It is snowing feathers. I am ahead of Mel but I don't need to look back to know he's there. I hear the feathers falling on him because they sizzle and melt like spit on a hot iron. It must be very late because all the houses are dark, although the streets are awash in daylight. I notice that the rope is geometrically small, a collection of midnight points. Individual snowflakes teeter-totter on our rope. Coming toward me in the opposite direction is Mister Mid-American Vocal Stylings. He is pushing a Norfolk Island pine in a terracotta pot along our rope. It's Mel who is dreaming him; this annoys me. I glare back over my shoulder. Mel is covered in Christmas wrapping paper—a candy cane and toy drum pattern. He crinkles as he reaches up to the nape of my neck. I feel him grasping the zipper of my dress between his thick fingers and then he is unzipping me. The night caresses my shoulder blades and the curve of my spine; it makes goose flesh on my buttocks. Then we topple off our rope and my dress flaps away like a crow and Mel traces the line of my jaw and he looks sad for a moment as we fall but then our bellies touch and oh, Mel, oh, oh, *oh!*

So I'm all alone on Christmas Eve. Mom is out doing whatever dead women do at night and Mel is just plain out. He hasn't been home much since he came looking for me and when he is here he hasn't got much to say. He's probably out looking for a new apartment. Or a new girlfriend.

I hear Mom fumbling with the door around eleven-thirty. Sometimes it takes her a couple of minutes to key the access code, so I let her in. "You're still up," she says.

"Holiday tomorrow," I say. "They call it Christmas."

"Where's Mel?" She touches her wig, as if to make sure it's on straight.

"Haven't seen him." I shrug. "Maybe he's up on the roof waiting for Santa."

"You're in a mood tonight."

"I am," I say, hoping she'll take the hint and leave me to grump in peace.

"I'll be in the living room," she says, "if you want me."

"Good. I'll be in here."

I listen to her putter around for a few minutes, which is okay, but when she starts to hum "Blue Christmas," I get up to go to my room except the kitchen table chirps. "Eleven-thirty-nine," it says. "Mel's calling."

"Answer," I say.

He's at the lab, rocking back and forth in front of the webcam. "Jennifer, there's something I want you to do." An appeal glyph appears on the screen.

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"Mel, come home."

"Find the top present on your pile under the tree." He looks as if he's trying to swallow a golf ball. "It has your name on it; the wrapping paper is red with candy canes and drums. Open it, okay, and then . . . you'll know." He clicks off before I can reply.

This is odd, but very Mel. Unfortunately I must now go into the living room where my mother will leap to the conclusion that I am interested in what she has to say.

She's next to the tree, tapping a cut-glass bell. "Your father bought this for me the Christmas I was pregnant." It clinks like a spoon in a teacup.

"Coming behind you." I retrieve the present, which is flat and about the size of my hand.

"What's that?" She watches me open an individually wrapped Krazy Kane. I haven't seen one of these before. "It looks like the candy canes we used to put in your stocking," says Mom and then she sighs. "I want to talk to you about Dad."

"A party in your mouth, it says here." I do not want this conversation. "Yummy fruit flavors spiced with jolly mood enhancers. Product of Continental Confection Corporation." I pretend to study the list of ingredients. "I don't get it. He hates CCC." I peel the wrapper.

"Why didn't you tell me your father was so unhappy?"

WHY? I want to wail. BECAUSE I'M NOT GOING TO HOLD THE NAIL ANYMORE WHILE YOU TWO POUND IT INTO MY HEAD. I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WORSE, THE WAY HE HANGS AROUND ALL DAY LIKE A BAD SMELL OR THE WAY YOU GO STAGGERING OFF EVERY BLEEDING BLUE NIGHT TO DO I DON'T KNOW WHAT AND THEN COME HOME AND PRETEND YOU'RE MY MOTHER, WHICH IS A SICK ZOMBIE GAME, BECAUSE MY *REAL* MOM WOULD NEVER, EVER HAVE DONE THIS TO ME.

But I don't.

Instead I stick the Krazy Kane into my mouth. At first it yields a sweet, spicy heat, which flares right to the edge of pain and then retreats with a tingling sensation that slides across the palate like mint champagne. I feel the tip of the Krazy Kane ravel and when I pull it out I can see that the red stripe is unwinding from the white peppermint base and separating into thin flavor threads.

"He left me a note," says Mom. "I found it this morning."

The kitchen table chirps again. "Eleven forty-seven. Mel calling." I rush to answer, twirling the Krazy Kane against my tongue, happy for an excuse to get away from her.

"How is it?" he says.

"It's yours, isn't it?"

He sags back in his chair and the camera catches the sheen of sweat at his temples. "It's Continental, you know. CCC. All they want is product, they could care less about art. I thought you might be mad, so I kept the whole thing a secret."

"You didn't need to."

"And then I thought you might hate the taste and hate me for selling out."

"No, it's great."

"Really?" The relief glyph flashes.

"Really."

A smile floods across his face. "You're not going to believe this, but I was

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so afraid you wouldn't like it that I didn't want to be there—actually I couldn't be there in case you didn't . . . you wouldn't . . ."

"I know." As the red threads dissolve, my tongue curls around cherry, raspberry, strawberry. "Come home now, Mel."

"Right." He jerks forward as if he means to dive through my screen, then remembers to click off.

"What are you doing in here?" Mom comes to the doorway, the light of the tree blinking behind her.

"That was Mel. He's on his way."

She settles onto the throne. "Jennifer, your father made a terrible mistake when he bought this thing." She fixes me with her mother's stare, as if challenging me to contradict her. "I don't why I let him talk me into it."

The kitchen table chirps again. "Twelve-oh-one. Merry Christmas. Mel calling."

"Answer." I love him, but he's starting to annoy me again.

Mel is still at his desk; he has turned his glyphs off. "Oh hi, Jennifer, there's something I forgot to tell you." He is shooting for nonchalance, but his aim sucks. "Remember the candy machine the other day? Well, I was going to buy you a Krazy Kane then. Your first." He could see that I was getting impatient and so he started talking faster. "Only that guy came out to yell at you." And *faster*. "Now you might be wondering how I knew that the machine would have Krazy Kanes, well, I looked of course, and it did, but that's not much of a surprise, because they're selling really well, actually, better than well, they were CCC's number two grosser last week and well, we're rich, well, not *rich* rich, but rich enough to afford a place of our own if you want because I know you're not that happy living with your parents so I thought it would be kind of a good Christmas present. . . ."

"That's great, Mel. Really. But just come home. I really want you here with me just now."

I can't believe he is wringing his hands. "I can't." He stares down at them as if he can't believe it either.

"You can't come home?"

"I can, but first I have to tell you something and then I have to click off." He is pale as bananarama. "I love you, Jennifer" he says, "and I hope you love me and if you do then I think we should get married and if that's okay with you then call me right back." The kitchen table goes blank.

"Good for him," says Mom, "although I saw this coming a couple of weeks ago." She is doing her best to smile. "So what are you waiting for?"

YES, I want to shout. YES, YES, *OH YES*.

And then I do. ❍

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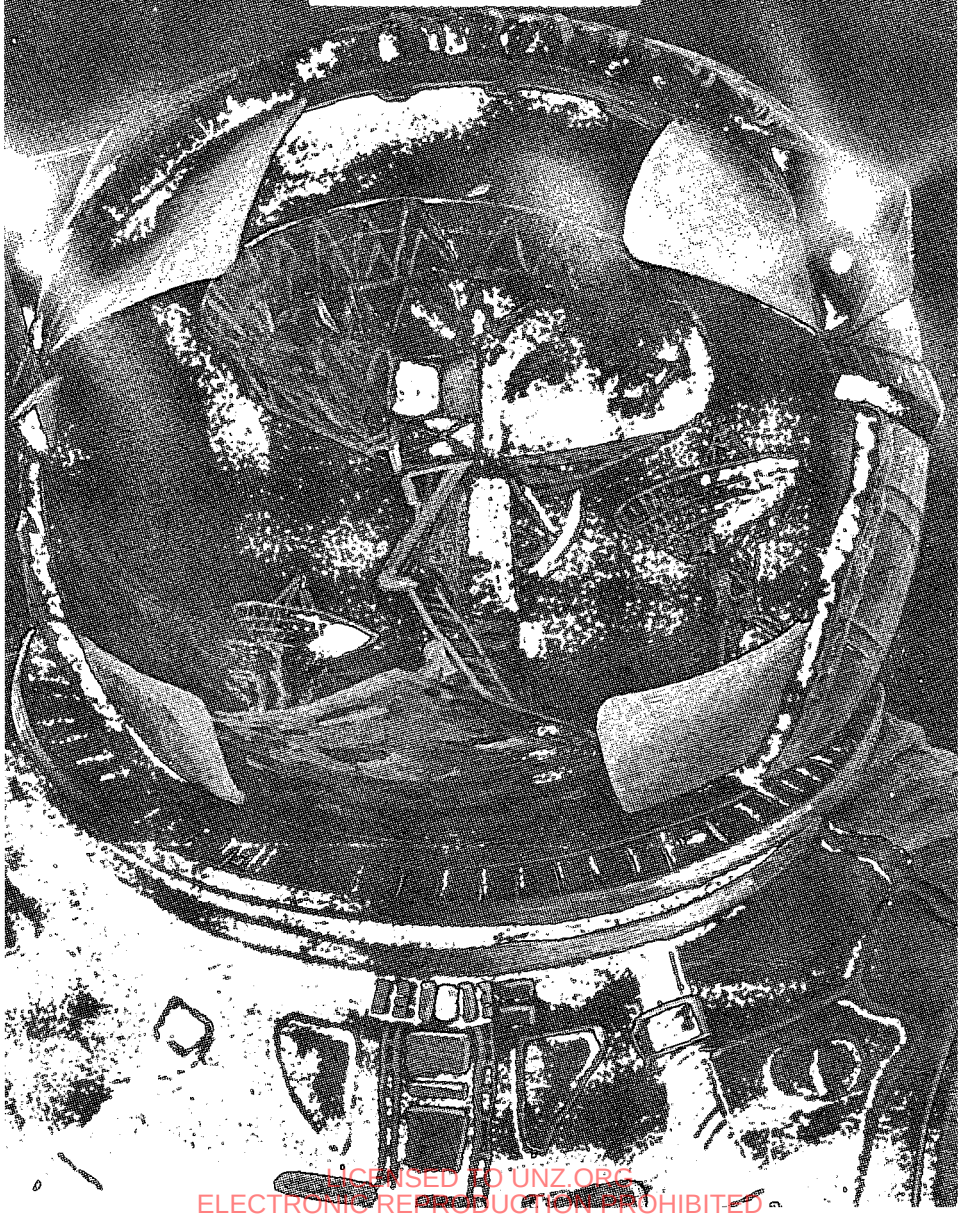
LYING TO DOGS

Robert Reed



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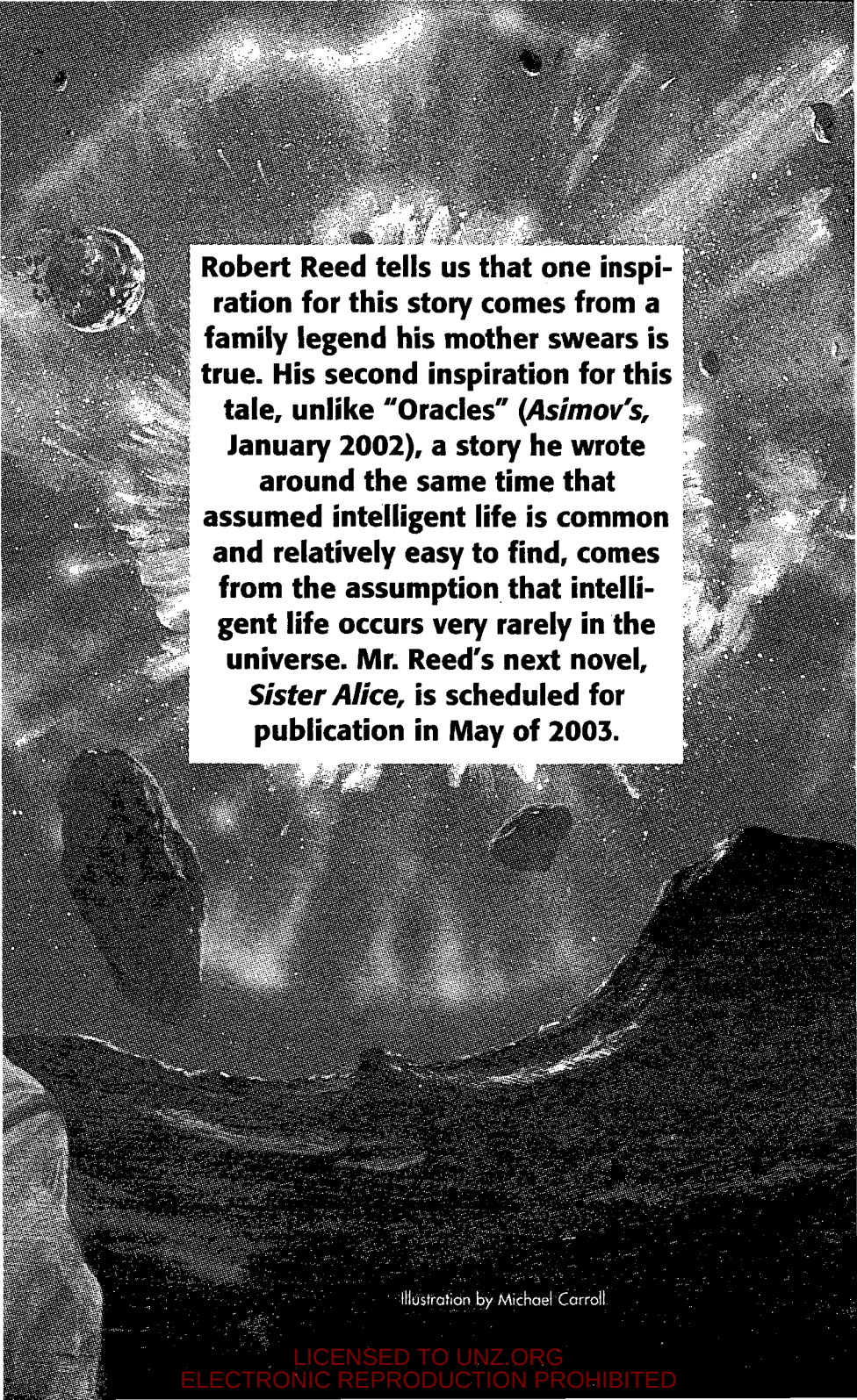

Robert Reed tells us that one inspiration for this story comes from a family legend his mother swears is true. His second inspiration for this tale, unlike "Oracles" (*Asimov's,* January 2002), a story he wrote around the same time that assumed intelligent life is common and relatively easy to find, comes from the assumption that intelligent life occurs very rarely in the universe. Mr. Reed's next novel, *Sister Alice,* is scheduled for publication in May of 2003.

Illustration by Michael Carroll

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When I was a boy, my family owned a black Labrador retriever. Our dog lived for cold autumn mornings and long rides into the country and the intoxicating stink of fear leaking from the hunted birds. But there were days when dogs weren't welcome. For instance, there was this river-rat buddy of my father's with a goose blind hiding on an isolated sandbar. The river was deep and relentless; it was no place to take your animal swimming. That's why on the first day of goose season, Dad rose before dawn, dressed in his warmest camouflage, then carried his gun to the car and drove off alone. And the way my mother tells the story, the poor dog was devastated by this betrayal. He stood at our front door all day long, howling and sobbing, outraged by what was obviously a horrible, horrible crime.

Dad came home happy, but his joy didn't last.

Mom corralled him in their bedroom, and after a melodramatic replay of her day, they hatched a simple plan. If my father wanted to hunt on the river, he had to slip his gun and clothes out to the car the night before, preferably while our dog was busy terrorizing the squirrels in the backyard. Then in the predawn blackness, he would dress for church: A good suit, a crisp and conservative tie, and shiny black leather shoes. Dad looked exceptionally pious as he drove away. And our Labrador, in delicious innocence, would sleep untroubled at my mother's feet.

It was a lie, but it was a compassionate and moral lie.

About that, I haven't the faintest doubt.

Imagine an enormous coincidence.

And now cube it.

By coincidence, Opal is using the entire array, building a comprehensive map of the Virgo cluster. In the midst of measuring the soft glare of an enormous galaxy, she notices something decidedly odd. Buried inside that wealth of natural light is a coherent pulse. A structured glow. A luminous song born millions of years in the past. And because Opal has a wealth of talents, she quickly teases the song into its assorted notes, discovering oceans of data waiting to be found—oceans created by a higher intelligence, designed to be obvious and decipherable, as well as utterly compelling.

"I could have been looking anywhere else," Opal admits. "We should have missed the signal. A fantastic amount of energy was utilized, but the signal was propagated in all directions. 'For every imaginable ear,' they claim."

"Who claims?" asks Aisha.

Opal emits a high-pitched squawk. "It's their name for themselves," she admits. "From what they tell me, it means *the Blessed*."

"A pleasant name," Sue remarks.

The rest of us say "The Blessed" aloud, as if it helps us understand our new neighbors in the cosmos.

Aisha glances at me, but she's speaking to Opal, asking, "So what do the Blessed look like?"

"Very much like you," Opal responds.

An image blossoms on the main screen: The creature is a biped with arms and legs and a recognizable head. But the resemblance stops there. The body is squat and strong and hairless, a thick hide of rhino-like flesh folded neatly at the elbows and shoulders and knees. Each hand has four long fingers, any one of which might be called the thumb, while the feet are triple-toed and resemble bald paws. The alien face has a carp's sucking mouth and no nose that I can find, and what seems to be the single eye is a flattened

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ellipse that reaches around the backside of the slick leathery head. Two round pupils swim inside the eye, both moving down to where the nose should be, crowding together and staring out at us.

"Hello, there!" Conrad jokes.

Tenwolf points out, "It doesn't look at all human."

"Not to you, perhaps," Opal replies. "But to me, it's practically your twin."

Everyone enjoys a good laugh.

Then our AI continues explaining the image. "The Blessed had DNA genetics and an oxygen-sugar metabolism. Their homeworld was substantially more massive than the Earth, with deeper oceans and a thicker atmosphere. But their sun was very much like ours."

Sue asks, "Is it male or female? Or something else, maybe?"

"Female," Opal says. Then she creates a second, nearly identical image that stands beside the first alien. "This is the male Blessed. If you notice, he's more heavily built and his head is a little more tapered."

Five humans stare at the newly discovered aliens. We are not stupid people. We've proven ourselves to be creative and adaptable individuals, not easily shaken by things unexpected. But our tongues have been stolen. None of us can whisper even the most obvious questions.

Opal decides to repeat herself. "I could have missed their signal. Any other day, and I wouldn't have noticed it. And since this is the only facility sensitive enough to find and decipher their message, we can assume that nobody else knows about the Blessed."

"Speaking of which," says Conrad. "How soon can we talk to Nearside?"

"Our main link is still inoperative," Opal reports. "And our secondary system won't be repaired for another seventy-four hours."

This is a second, decidedly smaller fluke. Our problematic com-satellite has gone on one of its little vacations, while our land-based system—three thousand kilometers of naked glass cable—was severed by a careless construction robot somewhere near Hadley.

Aisha asks, "What's our tertiary system?"

"A solar observation satellite," says Opal.

"Good," Conrad exclaims.

"But this is a flare season, and it's making some delicate, highest-priority measurements. It won't be available for another three hours."

"So we've got the story of the millennium," Conrad grumbles, "and we have to wait to deliver our news."

Again, everyone laughs.

Except for Opal. Normally the most joyful member of our team, she is conspicuously quiet for what must feel like an eternity to her. Then she repeats what she has already told us. What her less-perceptive colleagues haven't noticed. "I am using the past tense when I speak about the Blessed," she warns. "They are dead now. They have been extinct for nearly fifty million years."

"How do we know?" asks Tenwolf.

Another eternal pause. Then Opal admits, "It took phenomenal power to generate their signal. They generated that power when their sun and half a hundred of the nearest suns exploded in sequence."

"Shit," I mutter.

"But why?" Aisha inquires.

"I'm trying to learn that now," Opal promises.

A sudden anguish takes hold, and everyone turns to stare at the person who they always seek out whenever they feel less than wonderful.

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They look at the base counselor.
At me.

Exactly five people live on the back side of the moon. None of us are scientists, but each carries a solid layman's understanding of astronomy and high-physics. We were hired as technicians, trained in a rush and put up here to baby the Feynman Observatory—many billions of dollars' worth of mirrors and radio dishes and hardened electronics that mesh the mess together into a single vast eye.

Humans weren't part of the original plan. This giant facility was designed to be unmanned and self-reliant. But AIs and robots still have limits. Some expensive and embarrassing breakdowns happened during the first eighteen months of operation. Kicking and screaming, NASA found the money and boosters to bring us here. But the human presence has always been minimal on the moon, which makes our mission all the more difficult. And dangerous. And isolated, too. That's why some panel of dusty experts decided that a professional counselor was essential to the mission. And that's why they could include a man like me—someone with less than sterling talents in the arts of optical feeds and vacuum motors.

What I am is an ordained minister in the Church of Darwin. Raised in a traditional Methodist home, I have two pretentious degrees, in theology and in psychology. According to my resume, I should be perfectly suited to help my four compatriots deal with the isolation of this place, as well as the treacheries that come when too few people are placed too near one another.

I believe in God. Regardless of what skeptics believe, my church and faith call for a caring and wise Lord of All. I believe in goodness and in truth, and most important, I want to do what is right and moral. But despite my credentials and outward bearing, I have a rather slippery hold on those things that should matter most to me.

Aisha likes to tell me so.

She says it after we make love. She has a smart strong voice and lustful almond-shaped eyes, and she always pretends to be delighted with herself and disappointed with me. "I just screwed a minister," she laughs, pulling out from under me. Then she looks up at the ceiling of my tiny cabin, quietly boasting, "I'm ruining you. A man of the collar."

"I don't wear a collar," I'll tell her.

"You know what I mean."

"My church doesn't want celibacy. Not in functioning, normal adults." I will put a finger on her mouth, adding, "Our species is a social ape. Living any other way would be a lie and sacrilege."

But Aisha prefers a more traditional image of faith. Her God is a father figure, and my beliefs are never as important as her desire to be wicked. That's why she will look through me, reminding me, "You're here as a therapist. What kind of therapist fucks his patients?"

"Only one of my patients," I offer.

"Oh, I forgot. That makes it all right."

I love the woman. I can watch her for hours, never growing bored. She has black hair and a delicious Middle Eastern color, with full breasts and wide hips screaming to my genes, "I will make good babies."

But there can't be any children. Each of us has been surgically sterilized, left free of life's gravest and most joyful responsibility.

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"But I do love wicked men," Aisha will tell me. Eventually. Then she will push her mouth against the flat of my belly, running her wide tongue downward as she says my name with a fiendish delight.

"Xavier," she will whisper.

I will close my eyes.

"Xavier," she will groan.

Then I will cradle the back of her head, making knots with her hair, softly saying, "Aisha," as my ancient biology begins to stir again.

The gloomy news about the Blessed shakes Conrad. He looks at his surroundings—the tiny cafeteria with its five chairs and grimy food dispensers and the viewing screen that covers the longest wall. Knowing him like I do, I'm guessing that he'll quickly slip from surprise into a pissy rage. Sure enough, he says, "Bullshit." He sits up again, then asks Opal, "How do you know that they're extinct? How can you be sure?"

"That's what the Blessed are telling me," our AI explains.

"Is that so?" he barks.

Opal's voice is feminine and youthful. "I'm sorry, Conrad. But they're emphatic about their own demise. That's how they begin their message, and it is repeated throughout this very long text."

Sue straightens in her chair and aims for diplomacy. "It's been fifty million years. Isn't that right? How many species exist for even half as long?" She smiles at Conrad, adding, "It's only natural to refer to yourself as being gone—"

"No, Sue," Opal interrupts. "The Blessed destroyed their homeworld, and they destroyed their colony worlds, too."

Nobody speaks.

"One hundred and fifty billion died in the cataclysm."

Sue slumps forward. She is a large woman, and plain, and she is the simultaneous lover to both Conrad and Tenwolf. That's the kind of diplomat she can be. "Was it some kind of natural catastrophe?" she sputters, plainly disgusted by the implications. "Or maybe some terrible accident?"

Opal says, "No, and no."

Again, people glance at me.

I am the counselor, their minister and confidant. I clear my throat. "Opal," I say, "we need more details. More of an explanation."

"I'm sorting and translating the message now," she explains. Then she offers a measure of the data, using a crisp exponential number that makes her audience blink and shiver. How many thousands of years would it take humans to digest such a volume of knowledge?

I glance at my Aisha, staring into her narrowed eyes.

"The Blessed willingly destroyed themselves," Opal maintains. "The process began with their home sun, and as the shockwave reached each successive sun, it too was demolished by the same means."

The screen goes to white, and then an image appears. At first glance, I'm sure that Opal is generating the scene, but then I notice odd marks in the center and along the curved edges. This is a portion of the aliens' message. The Blessed have thoughtfully supplied us with captions; their language resembles a slanted line wearing intricate bumps and knots that Opal can already read at a glance. Where it matters, she supplies translations. Where it is vital, she focuses on tiny portions of the image, letting us watch as fleets of silvery vessels plunge into a red dwarf and then a fat yellow-white sun

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and finally a fierce blue-white giant, each star exploding with the smooth ease of a Fourth of July firecracker.

Impressed, Tenwolf asks, "How did they do this godawful thing?"

"I haven't found any schematics," Opal admits. "What I wanted you to see is this. Here."

The shockwave cools as it expands, but only to a point. It remains bright and fierce, swelling with the smooth inevitability of an inflating balloon. Even a scientific novice like myself can tell that these aren't ordinary novas and supernovas. Each blast is asymmetric, and nothing visible remains of the dead suns. Are they black holes, or has all their matter been consumed? I nearly ask. But then the shockwave washes up against an unseen barrier, and a blinding flash erupts, leaving everyone in the tiny room blinking and wiping at their wounded eyes.

Opal stops the image and runs it backward, enlarging a pinprick of the brilliance. "The wave front was a sphere a little more than twenty light-years across," she reports. "A membrane of some kind had been set in its path. The membrane had an intricate design and minimal mass. It absorbed the wave's energies and retransmitted them as coherent light. In effect, the Blessed built an infrared laser that pointed in every direction at once."

Again, Tenwolf asks, "How can that be done?"

"It can't be," is Conrad's opinion. But I can see the doubt swimming in his face, and I hear a desperate hope in his otherwise solid voice.

"What kind of output are we talking about?" Aisha asks.

Opal offers another extraordinary number, in joules. Then after the briefest pause, she adds, "This was a signal meant for faraway eyes."

The twenty light-year sphere recedes. The galaxy in Virgo fills the screen, and just as suddenly it begins to shrink away. A giant whirlpool of stars and gas perhaps a hundred times more massive than our wispy little Milky Way, but its majesty vanishes with the same smooth ease, becoming a pale smear barely visible against hundreds of smears of nameless, same-looking light.

The alien message is a flicker, silent and quick.

But it is noticeable, yes. Provided that one happens to be looking at the right place with the proper kinds of eyes, it is obvious.

Opal gives her slow companions a moment to wrestle with the distances and energies and this vision of endless Creation. Then with a flat, careful voice, she remarks, "There is a postscript buried within the message."

"What is it?" Conrad asks.

"I'm translating it now," the AI replies.

Sue straightens her back again, shoring up her nerves.

Tenwolf uses a fingertip, drawing slow and precise circles in the dust that clings to the tabletop.

Aisha glances my way.

"Can you make a translation?" I ask. Then, foolishly, I wonder aloud, "Do you need help, Opal?"

"I am finished, and thank you, no." Again the screen empties itself, turning a perfect deathly white. Then she explains, "The Blessed have left twenty-three routes to make the translation, and I wanted to work through all of them before I answered. I think you'll see: This moment requires absolute certainty."

"Are you certain now?" asks Aisha.

"I am, yes," Opal promises. "It seems that the postscript is many things. But mostly, the Blessed meant it to be a nest of warnings."

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* * *

Our base camp is a collection of tiny prefabricated shelters joined together with flexible, intestine-sized tunnels, everything buried beneath several meters of hurriedly packed regolith. The only substantial room is the machine bay with its arching roof over a half acre of native stone. The stone floor is polished smooth but always gray and drab to the eye. The bay is the least habitable portion of the base. We normally leave the main doors open to the vacuum, allowing robots and working humans to come and go as they please. It is a busy, silent place, and I learned early in the mission that this was where the others liked to meet with me, speaking on private channels, telling me about their problems and the problems they could see in their various compatriots.

Conrad is our mission leader, and it is a duty that he takes seriously, even when he pretends to despise the title. He is a gangly, pleasantly handsome man who has climbed mountains on two worlds and has three ex-wives and can thrive on a pair of naps for every twenty-four hours of activity. He often asks me about the mood of our team. But I am everyone's counselor, I remind him. I can't discuss anything said in confidence, no matter how trivial. Conrad likes to kid, telling me, "You can use pseudonyms. How's that?" He means it as a joke, and he doesn't. The simple truth is that our leader worries about the emotional atmosphere around him. Like many charming people, he suspects that others can summon smiles and jokes as easily as he does. His deepest feelings are secrets that he holds close, but I sense them whenever he starts to tease me. He hates his responsibilities as surely as he needs them. For us, Conrad is more friend than boss. And I like the man. I like him quite a lot. But of course I like everyone here. We wouldn't be together if there wasn't an easy, natural affection that was shared by all of us.

Tenwolf is our oldest citizen. In his mid-fifties, with graying black hair and a pudgy, decidedly unimpressive body, he is Pawnee by blood and Presbyterian by upbringing. My friend is a solitary creature who understands machines in an almost spiritual way. When the enormous Delta dish jammed, it was Tenwolf who guessed what was wrong, crawling into the cramped workings to yank loose a slice of insulation that had fallen into the worst possible cranny. Meticulous work is his forte. He feasts on tedious, difficult assignments that last for days and days. What he hates is the deadness of the moon. He will sit with me in the machine bay, hands busy inside the guts of some wounded robot, describing a favorite fishing trip or teaching me how to grow perfect tomatoes. "If I can't feel the wind on my face," he admits, "at least I can feel it swirling inside my head. Know what I mean?"

Absolutely. Yes.

Occasionally Tenwolf asks about my little church and faith. What exactly do I believe, and why?

I don't want to proselytize, but I can't ignore his curiosity, either. "I believe in life," I tell him. "Life was born for a reason. It prospers for a lot of reasons. Humans aren't holy by themselves, but as we move out into the universe, we'll be doing good godly work."

"Are we going to make the moon green?"

"Eventually, yes."

"Mars and Venus?"

I can't say what the timetable will be. But I find it easy to nod, promising him, "Our neighboring worlds are sure to be terraformed. And people will

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eventually reach the stars, and if their worlds aren't alive already, we're going to make them happy and green."

He likes the sound of those words. Usually he nods and smiles, even when he's pointing out, "Our mirrors have seen plenty of earth-sized worlds. Several hundred, the last time I counted. But how many of those places show any trace of life?"

"It's early in our search," I have to remind him. And myself.

Then Tenwolf will look out the open doors of the machine bay, staring at the empty dust and the hard black sky, finishing our conversation by saying, "I believe you. Shit, what are my choices here?" Then he laughs, adding, "But doesn't it look like a fucking waste, all the emptiness that we've seen so far. . . ?"

Sue is our diplomat, our easy woman. Sometimes she sleeps with Tenwolf but more often with Conrad. She's also made overtures to me while we discuss her feelings and fears. Sue has surprisingly small hands for a big-bodied woman. On several occasions, she has set her hand on mine, and then with a focused smile, she will say nothing. She just stares at my eyes and waits, and it's up to me to steer us back to a proper subject.

"They knew what they were doing," she likes to tell me, and herself. "Putting the five of us together, I mean. Out of twenty thousand applicants, we're the best people. The best team. A perfect team, I think."

Twenty thousand applicants is an exaggeration. After the unstable and incompetent were excluded, the working list was barely six hundred names.

"You've got to be pleased," Sue tells me. "We've been here for five months, and has there been one serious fight?"

"No," I admit. "Not one punch thrown."

"Seven more months to go," she remarks. "I can't believe it. We're nearly halfway done with our assignment."

Sue has a soft voice. A deep, soothing voice. I suspect that's one reason why men go to bed with her so willingly. They know that after sex, they can close their eyes, letting her pleasant words wash over them, pulling them into a good hard sleep.

Sometimes I wonder about her and me: She drops her hand on mine, and I let her. We're standing in the hard vacuum of the machine bay, each wearing a bulky lifesuit, but I can feel the pressure of her hand through my glove. I look into her plain gray eyes, watching her dare me to make the next move.

"Who do you think is responsible for all these good feelings?" I ask. It's the day before the Virgo signal arrives, and I'm shamelessly fishing for a compliment. I wink and smile, saying, "Sue," with my own soothing voice. "Who do you think does the most to keep us happy?"

But she doesn't tell me, "You do, Xavier."

Instead Sue lifts her eyebrows and smiles with a chilled delight, telling me, "Opal does."

"Our AI?" I sputter.

"Why not?" She laughs, pulling her hand out from under mine. "She's always pleasant, always professional. She's never busy or tired. And she's always at the center of everything we're trying to accomplish up here. Know what I mean?"

"They didn't always call themselves the Blessed," we are told. "The species took that name late in their history."

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Conrad says, "Okay, I'll bite. Why is that, Opal?"

"They were technological creatures for a long time. For nearly one hundred thousand years, by human count." She pauses, pretending to take a thoughtful breath. "Their galaxy is enormous," she reminds us. "It has more than a trillion suns and far more than ten trillion planets. The Blessed built dishes and mirrors that dwarfed everything human-built, and when their telescopes didn't give answers, they sent out fleets of robotic starships. They wanted to find intelligent aliens. They wanted friends. So they looked for worlds like theirs, and when they couldn't find any, they broadened their parameters, studying water worlds and jupiters and cold worlds with ammonia or methane seas. And after all that, they realized just how rare life was and how lucky they were. And that's when they began calling themselves the Blessed."

As Opal speaks, she shows us glimpses of the ancient data. Worlds slide past like snowflakes. Like brown and gray and muddy blue snowflakes. There is a dreary sameness to these anonymous bodies. I notice it even before I read the brief descriptions culled from official reports. The small worlds resemble Mars, pitted with craters and desperate for water. Many of the larger worlds have been suffocated by runaway greenhouse events. But many more are as wet as the Earth, with mild atmospheres and continents that practically beg for life. Yet something has always gone wrong. Eccentric orbits are numbingly common. Impacting asteroids and comet showers are brutal clichés. But more likely still are the supernovas that have sterilized every world within several light-years. And more terrible than exploding suns are the gamma radiation storms that arrive whenever neutron stars collide—a vicious, amoral event that kills everything within a thousand light-years. And if the world is lucky enough to escape those disasters, it has to face a final nightmare: The core of every galaxy can turn active, gases and entire suns falling into the central black hole, a quasar-like belch ravaging every planet that isn't buried inside the deepest, darkest clouds of interstellar dust.

The Blessed have given us a grim, sobering encyclopedia. After another five minutes of wastelands and ruin, Aisha groans, "Did they find life anywhere, Opal? Anywhere at all?"

"Many times, yes," says Opal. "But life usually comes as single-cell organisms living in subterranean refuges."

"Usually," Conrad echoes.

"The Blessed found three examples of robust, high-functioning biospheres." She shows us one of those worlds: It looks very much like the Earth, complete with blue-green jungles and an emerald blue ocean. But before we can take hope from this image, our AI cautions, "This is a much older world than the Earth, and its fauna are simple-minded and slow to change. Left alone, intelligence wouldn't evolve here until long after its sun left the main spectrum."

I give a low, anguished moan.

Yet Sue insists on finding hope. She says, "But Opal. What percentage of worlds did the Blessed study in depth? In just their own galaxy, I mean."

"A little less than 1 percent," the AI reports.

Sue brightens. She looks at all of us, promising, "There could be dozens of intelligent species that they didn't find. And that's just in their neighborhood."

"Maybe it's an extra dangerous galaxy," Conrad suggests. "Because it's so large. Because its core is sure to be more active than ours."

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I like the sound of those words.

But then Opal says, "No, actually. The Blessed are absolutely clear about this. High-technologies have to be exceedingly rare in the universe."

"How rare?" I ask.

"According to the Blessed's formulas," she says, "within our Local Group—the Milky Way and Andromeda and the assorted dwarf galaxies—there is no reason to expect even one technological species."

"But we're technological," Conrad complains.

"Maybe we're just very, very lucky," Tenwolf adds. His expression is unnaturally calm, a tight lid set over his emotions. He breathes hard, once and then again, and then he asks Opal, "Is that what we are? A fluke?"

"According to the Blessed," she maintains, "life survives only because of many enormous strokes of good fortune."

Aisha glances at me.

"Okay," I begin. "Opal. How did the aliens arrive at this conclusion? Do they tell you their rationale?"

"By many means, yes," she says.

"So what's the reason?" Conrad demands to know.

The pause is long and unnerving.

Then our AI offers words that I have never heard from her, or from any other machine. Quietly and with a palpable sadness, she tells us, "Really, this is just awful, awful news."

Sometimes I use Opal as the counselor's counselor. I'll mention my moods, blue or otherwise, and her voice will make the appropriately sympathetic sounds. She wears a veneer of mock-empathy on top of her vast intellect. As well as any lover, she can say, "I'm sorry you feel that way. What can I do to help you?" But after the next false breath, her real nature surfaces. "We have a variety of mood-altering medicines in stock. Or perhaps you should sleep more. As I'm sure you know, sleep deprivation is a problem in modern society."

"Thank you, Opal."

"Have I helped you, Xavier?"

"Not at all," I will admit.

"I'm sorry," she replies, no trace of sorrow in her smooth, untroubled voice. Nor any hint of disappointment, either.

But she does help me. She's an ineffectual counselor, and that always renews my own fragile sense of purpose. She reminds me that only humans can minister to human troubles. I don't care what Sue believes: Opal is just a machine—our machine—and she is designed for a few exceedingly narrow tasks. She steers the telescopes with a precise touch, and she has a genius for sorting and interpreting the endless data. But genius isn't a steerable dish. You just can't point it anywhere and focus it on any thing. We are stationed here because Opal wasn't able to manage unexpected malfunctions. By the time we touched down, nearly half of the facility was in sleep-mode, a string of little catastrophes having done their worst. Yet the machine was unembarrassed by her failures. With a cheery voice, she told us, "Welcome." She said, "It will be my honor to work with you." Then without a trace of shame, she said, "I'm a poor mechanic. Please, take this duty out of my unfit hands."

Opal has no soul.

A genuine soul would have been angry and embarrassed and defensive—all the reactions that good people think of as ugly weaknesses. But nothing

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is weak or ugly in Nature. We evolved our thin skins for the best reasons. Pride makes us excel, while nothing can defend our good name quite like an old-fashioned hissy fit.

Opal was designed by souls who believe in ugly things, and that's why they made her endlessly polite and pleasant. That's why she has no soul, and that's one of the reasons why I sometimes catch myself feeling envy toward her.

A helpful and lovely little envy it is.

"Our universe is frail," Opal declares. "The Blessed discovered the fragility in certain mathematical constructions, and at least twice, their researchers came treacherously close to disaster."

Conrad acts offended. "What do you mean, frail?"

"Our universe only pretends to be stable." Her voice wears sadness, but beneath the words I hear something else. Opal sounds interested. Intrigued, even. "Human physicists have already suggested the possibility. The universe was created tiny and hot, and it was stable in one fashion. But that stability failed, and that's what caused the inflationary expansion. This is why we live within an enormous flat universe today." Opal pauses, giving us a moment to consider her words. Then she says, "Imagine a ball and a long steep hill. Our universe is that ball. We started on the flat crest of the hill, but with the inflationary period, we started to roll free. The expansion ended when the ball came to rest on a second, extremely narrow ledge. And that's where we exist today."

"Shit," I mutter.

Everyone says that simple, perfect word.

"Are you familiar with these concepts?" Opal inquires.

It sounds familiar, yes. But this is an ugly, mostly discredited concept that's usually buried in the back of undergraduate texts.

"In one sense, natural events cannot make the universe unstable," Opal assures us. "Yet in a different sense, it is easily accomplished."

"Explain yourself," Conrad snaps.

"Extreme energies coupled with certain quantum manipulations will create tiny pockets of chaotic pseudomatter, each pocket ripe to begin a cascading, catastrophic event. This is what the Blessed achieved on at least two occasions."

"They did this on purpose?" asks Tenwolf.

"Never," says Opal. "The pseudomatter arose without warning. The mathematics are complicated and misleading, which is why they were unaware of the danger. In the first case, there was a one-in-ninety chance of disaster. The second incident arose from entirely different means, and if the work hadn't been aborted instantly, there would have been a one-in-three chance of obliteration."

Sue slumps forward, gazing at the cement floor.

Aisha looks past me, her almond eyes wide and empty.

With an angry, almost defiant tone, Tenwolf asks, "So what would happen? If they'd gotten that ball rolling again, I mean."

"The universe would fall apart," Opal replies.

Nobody speaks.

She explains, "At the speed of light, beginning at the point of the initial event, our laws would fail and matter would find itself transformed, and no mathematics can predict what would form in whatever was left behind."

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Again, I say, "Shit."

"At the speed of light," Aisha repeats. "That fast?"

"Yes," says Opal.

"But that's slow," Sue points out. "I mean, if it happened now, and it began a billion light-years away—"

I interrupt her, admitting, "I don't understand. How did this prove to the Blessed that intelligent life is very rare?"

But then I see what is ugly and obvious.

"The universe appears to be intact," she tells me. She reminds everyone of this hard fact. "When the aliens looked into the sky, they saw stars and galaxies. If there were any species with their technical skills, they reasoned, and if these species were a mere one or two million years older than them . . . well, then at least one neighbor would have accomplished the unthinkable."

"But you wouldn't see it coming," Conrad points out. He looks at each of us, shrugging his shoulders with a forced nonchalance. "It's like an accident around the bend. You can't know it's there until you're on top of it."

I don't know why that should make me feel any better.

Our gloom makes Conrad angry. "Hey, people," he cries out. "It isn't going to happen. Even if the Blessed were right about everything—which is a big mess of ifs—then there just aren't that many species to worry about. And besides, shit . . . it's fifty million years later, and we're still part of the landscape here. . . !"

I think about death, and another obvious question takes hold of me.

"Opal," I say.

"Yes, Xavier."

"Why did the Blessed kill themselves?"

"In part, because they didn't trust their own nature." Her sadness evaporates into a cool puzzlement. "They had discovered two routes by which they could destroy the universe, but that probably isn't an exhaustive list. Any researcher with a modern facility and a careless attitude might—"

"Wait," Conrad interrupts. "Let me understand this. They killed themselves because they were afraid that they *might* do something awful in the future?"

"Essentially, yes."

I am numb and cold and empty.

"Shit, they don't sound human to me." Conrad gives out a big jolly laugh, forced and unseemly. "God, can you imagine us doing that? Can you?"

I stare at my nervous hands.

"Their message," says Opal, "is also an attempt to warn other species. Yes, they orchestrated a mass suicide. But this was also the only way to generate a signal sufficiently bright to be noticed by whichever species might be living inside distant, widely scattered galaxies."

Aisha wipes at her cheeks, flattening her tears.

Conrad decides on action. He stands and says, "Opal. How soon can we transmit through our tertiary link?"

"In another fifty-two minutes," she answers.

"Create a message. Keep it brief, and then show it to us."

I look up suddenly. I look up and blurt, "No. Stop."

As if offended, Conrad throws a hard glare my way. "What do you mean, stop?"

"There's choices here," I tell him. Then I take an enormous breath that

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leaves me shaking, and turning to the others, I explain myself. "We need to be careful. We have to find another course, if there is one." I gasp, and I swallow, and I add, "Please. Just let's talk it through with me once. Will you, please?"

At the center of the Feynman Array stands a small and very dead volcano. A gentle road leads to a summit made smooth and simple by the endless rain of micrometeorites.

When I'm in a reflective mood, or when my duties are too much to comfortably bear, I will ride a buggy up to where the ground is flat, and I'll gaze out across the sprawling field of telescopes, marveling at the energy and relentless genius of Life.

I wish I were standing there now.

"If we tell the world," I begin. Then I lick my lips and swallow, my throat lined with sandpaper. "If we give people even a hint that we've gotten this message . . . well, I think we have to consider the consequences. . . ."

"What consequences?" Conrad barks.

But the others trade worried little looks, thinking along the same awful lines.

"If the Blessed are right—" Aisha begins.

"This is horrible," Sue interrupts, wiping her eyes with little fists. "People will be terrified. How can we live, knowing that at any moment, without warning, the universe can come to an end?"

"An empty, lifeless universe," Tenwolf rumbles.

"I'm alive," Conrad counters. "Plenty alive, thank you!"

He means it as a joke, but nobody laughs.

"What we need to do now," I say, "is take our time. We won't do anything that we can't take back later, at least until we've reached a consensus. That's all I'm asking for." I show them a warm, caring smile. Or at least I hope I do. "We'll just let this first window pass. There's no need to sprint into the future without a little soul-searching first."

Everyone nods in agreement, except for Conrad.

But he finally begins to appreciate the general mood. Shrugging his broad shoulders, he admits, "That wouldn't be too awful, I guess. I mean, it's not like this news is going to go stale on us."

Sue touches him lightly on the an arm, squeezing in a comforting way.

"Opal," Conrad calls out. "No transmissions. Until you're given a specific order, we are off-line."

"As you wish," she replies.

Then his charm reasserts itself. He smiles and coughs gently into a loose fist, and then with a calm and reasonable voice says, "But of course, you know, this really shouldn't be our decision to make."

Sue glances at me, trying to read my response. Then she asks Conrad, "What do you mean? Whose decision should it be?"

"Good question," he allows.

Aisha leans closer to me, a fond hand finding my knee. "If we decide not to share this . . . if that's what we end up doing . . . then won't we have to destroy the information, eventually. . . ?"

"Opal," I say.

"Yes, Xavier."

"How long will it take to erase all the data from the Blessed's transmission?"

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She is a powerful, deeply redundant machine. "Six minutes," she says, "and twelve seconds." Which is a very long time for her.

"No retrieval possible. Am I right?"

"A complete digital scrub. Yes, Xavier."

Only the thinnest, weakest doubt can be heard, and I'm not sure if the doubt is in her voice or in my own ears.

"Okay," says Conrad. His eyes are as bright as torches, and his big hands make fists that cause the muscles of his wrists to bunch up. "Just so we understand," he says, working to sound reasonable. "Just to put things in perspective. What are we talking about throwing out here? Plutonium? Anthrax? Or could it be, maybe, the secrets of the universe?"

A doubting silence blossoms.

Before I can respond, our leader blurts, "Opal. In their transmissions, do the Blessed show us how to build starships?"

"Not as schematics, no. But they show all of their machines in considerable detail. Yes, by several routes, I think their engines and life support systems can be reinvented."

"How about terraforming dead worlds? Any clues there?"

"Blessedform," says Opal, "is a more accurate translation."

Conrad faces me, smiling with a mixture of conviction and honed fury. "Whichever," he allows. "What I want to know . . . just tell us . . . are we now going be able to turn Mars into a habitable place?"

A dirty red planet appears on the screen. An armada of alien ships appear, falling like rain on its barren surface, each ship collapsing into a heap of ant-like machines that build factories that generate more ants that subsequently march across the dunes and low craters, remaking the shape and composition of everything within their considerable reach. The air thickens and warms. Water bursts from the cold ground, flowing into the dead seas. Then Blessed vegetation explodes from the enriched soil, and a second wave of ships brings the carp-mouthed, rhino-hided colonists.

The world is transformed in an instant. But that's impossible, of course. According to a translated calendar in the bottom corner, the entire miracle takes a few days less than eighteen Earth years.

"The Blessed did this work routinely," Opal explains. "This was their standard method for spreading across several hundred solar systems."

"And then they killed themselves," Aisha mutters, in despair.

I nod at her, smiling in a grim, approving fashion. The mood inside our little room is shifting moment by moment. I feel the electric play of emotions. I'm alert but remote, watching events from some high vantage point. Every anxious breath brings an instant shift in allegiances. When people glance at Conrad, they grin instinctively, telling him that they are in his court. Who wouldn't want to believe his rosy, determined vision? But when those same people glance at their counselor, they find themselves pensive and lost, showing me sad-eyed stares that prove they are good people, desperate to do whatever is right.

Conrad is a winner and a natural optimist; he sees only the affirmative expressions. Counting allies, he discovers what looks like a majority, and then with the courage of his convictions, the man makes his bold misstep.

"Opal," he says. "Have you put together that broadcast? In case we ever tell people about this, I mean."

"I have prepared a message, yes. Three and a half seconds long, it is compressed and explains the fundamentals. Yes."

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In every way possible, I say nothing. I sit without moving, staring at my own hands, guessing that it will be Aisha—

"Wait," my lover growls. "I thought we were still deciding what to do here!"

"We are deciding," Conrad counters. "I just want to get things ready. You know, in case we vote to go ahead with it."

"I guess that's reasonable," Sue offers.

Tenwolf stares at the screen, studying the blue-green face of that long-dead world. He intends to speak. His mouth opens and closes again, and then he manages a deep breath and turns to face us, an observation beginning with a sigh that is hacked off when Conrad asks our AI, "Can you show us what you've done? Concentrate on the starships, okay? Show us what our friends back home will see on their holos." He can't help but speak as if this is a certainty. Giving us a little wink, he asks, "How's that sound to you?"

Aisha squirms in her seat.

"It sounds fair," Sue allows. Then she says, "Fair," again, as if she isn't sure that she said the word properly the first time.

"Sure, why not?" Tenwolf mutters.

Conrad looks in my direction, but his focus is wrong. Is off. He only pretends to make eye contact with me, asking nobody in particular, "How about it? Are you going to let this happen?"

"Do I have a choice?" I ask.

Conrad gives a little snort, and then says, "Sure you've got a choice. That's why I just asked you—"

"In the end, I mean."

He isn't quite sure what he just heard. "What end? What—?"

Tenwolf rises to my bait. "You're the boss here," he explains to Conrad. "If you want, you can make the transmission. You don't need our blessing, if that's what you want to do."

Conrad bristles. "Hey, I am willing to listen. If you people don't want—"

"'You people'?" I whisper. "What's that mean?"

He didn't intend to sound dismissive, and that's exactly how he sounds now. Conrad is ambitious and practical, and it is that first beautiful trait that causes him to spout out, "Listen to yourselves! This is the biggest, finest thing that's ever happened to our species. A message from the stars! It's exactly why each of us wanted to come here to begin with, and what you're talking about doing is throwing away the greatest gift—"

"A damned gift," I whisper.

"Shut up," he blurts. Then he takes a deep breath through his big white teeth, and he adds, "I know. There's some tough stuff in this message. But you've got to realize something here: It isn't up to us to decide what humanity knows and what it doesn't know." He gives a determined little snort, adding, "Sure, there's dangers involved in this—"

"Like the end of everything," says Aisha, her voice somewhere between sarcasm and grief.

"I agree," says Conrad. He lifts his big hands, and then slaps them into his lap again. "But let's talk about that. How can we protect ourselves from this kind of nightmare? I'll tell you how. We have a guidebook to the dangers, ready-made and ours for the taking. Have you thought about that? If the five of us, just the five of us, decide to erase this fabulous wealth of information, and a thousand years down the line, people stumble into the same two traps that the Blessed found—"

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"But what if," Sue begins. Then she dips her head, realizing that she just interrupted Conrad.

He looks at her, and with too much sharpness, he tells her, "Go on. Say what you're thinking."

"People might do it intentionally."

"Do what? End the universe?" Conrad snorts and shakes his head, unable to even conceive of such a thing. "Who the hell—?"

Aisha tells him, "A religion might do just that." Then she gives me a glance and an apologetic grin, adding, "People have all sorts of odd beliefs. Don't they, Xavier?"

I say nothing.

"We wouldn't let them," is Conrad's reply.

"I can imagine it," says Tenwolf. Then he laughs darkly, adding, "It'd be like a race among the doomsday faiths. Who's going to be first to do God's will?"

It wouldn't be God's will.

But instead of saying what is obvious, I choose a middle course. Without fuss or any negative rumblings, I tell them, "All I want is for us to miss the next broadcast window. All right? Just give us time to study the Blessed's broadcast a little more and imagine some of the consequences, and then if we can agree—"

"If we can," Aisha whispers.

"That's all." I shrug my shoulders, and I give everyone a little wink. I know these people. For five months, I have lived with nobody else, hearing only their voices and the thoughts behind them, and if I don't feel in control, at least I know that I've won the first round of what will be a long, hard-fought battle.

I win the round when Conrad rises to his feet, blurting, "Okay, then. We'll sit on the most extraordinary news in human history. Because we're that much more important than anyone else in Creation."

Sue acts uneasy, but not enough to abandon the group's wishes.

Tenwolf suggests, "Let's all just take a break. I know I need one."

Aisha says, "I could use a long nap." Then she looks at me with frank, intoxicating eyes.

"Okay, then," Conrad says. And without another sound, he leaves the four of us sitting alone in the tiny galley.

We stay in our seats.

For six or seven minutes, we calmly and rationally discuss things that are too large and horrible to be discussed either calmly or rationally. I speak, but only when it can help. Aisha talks about responsibility toward our own species. Sue pushes for some accommodation that will make everyone happy. Could we erase only the dangerous portions of the Blessed's message, maybe? But Tenwolf finds technical reasons why that selective censorship will fail, and with a cold eye on the future, he adds, "But of course, you know, if one of us ever decides to break the silence . . . even just to admit what we know now . . . well, just what we know now could have some profound implications. . . ."

He pauses, grinning as if in pain. "If we decide to keep this secret forever," he says finally, and sadly, "I guess there's only one way to manage it. . . ."

That dark thought catches us by surprise. What the man seems to be suggesting—if only as a theory—is that we should repeat what the Blessed undertook for themselves.

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Some kind of group suicide? Is that what he means?

I start to tell everyone, "No, I think we can keep the silence. Even Conrad can. If we're motivated, and if nobody would believe us anyway . . ."

But before my voice can find a convincing tone, another thought intrudes. I'm suddenly thinking about Conrad. Where exactly did he go when he stormed out of the room? I straighten my back, and I swallow hard, and with a flat, worried voice, I say, "Opal? What is Conrad doing right now?"

"Conrad," she says, as if barely able to remember the man. Then after the illusion of a shallow wet breath, she admits, "Conrad has taken a small buggy out, and he just reached the Delta dish, and he is preparing to broadcast a tight-beamed signal toward the Lagrange Solar-Watch Satellite."

An icy hand drops onto the back of my neck.

I flinch, reaching behind my head and feeling nothing but my own goose-pimpled flesh.

"Shit," I mutter.

Then with a louder, less emotional voice, I ask, "Do you have control of the dish?"

"By several means," replies Opal, her voice halfway cheerful. "But Conrad has left specific instructions. I am not to interfere—"

"If we tell you to interfere," Aisha begins.

"None of you are the mission's leader," the machine reminds us. And with a cold but palpable pleasure, she adds, "He doesn't want me to listen to you,

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and I don't want to help you. I agree with Conrad. I want him to succeed."

Tenwolf gives me a hard look, rising now.

Except to breathe, I don't move. I feel numb and stupid, and beaten.

Aisha stands and says, "We can use the big wagon, all of us. If we start right now—"

"Yeah," says Tenwolf.

Sue says, "There isn't time," even as she rises to her feet. Then she thinks to ask, "How much time is there, Opal?"

The machine won't answer.

Tenwolf says, "That satellite's going to be deaf for another twenty-nine minutes. About. And then its high-gain automatically swings back around to us—"

"We'll get to the dish inside ten minutes," says Aisha. "We've got plenty of time." Then she looks at the one person not standing. "Or do you want him to succeed? Is that what you're thinking, Xavier?"

Honestly, I'm not sure about my own thoughts now.

"Xavier?" she repeats.

I stand, and with a quiet, sad voice, I tell them, "The door to the machine bay . . . we're going to find it shut and sealed. . . ."

"Shit, it is closed," says Tenwolf. He looks at the galley's map of the facility, mashing a thick finger against a horizontal red line. "And I bet Conrad's got it jammed tight, too. That's what I'd do, sure."

"Then it's finished," Sue whispers, faintly relieved to have been beaten. "It's been decided."

"Nothing's decided," I tell her.

Tenwolf looks at me, his finger pointing elsewhere. "You're thinking about the emergency airlock?"

I nod.

"There's only emergency suits in there," Aisha warns.

"But they're quick on and already primed," Tenwolf counters.

"You can't," Sue says to him. Pleading now.

A bitter laugh leaks from Tenwolf, and then he says, "I'll take a robot off its repair job, and you can ride it out to the dish. I just don't know how long that's all going to take—"

He's speaking to me.

"Run," he advises.

But I already am.

The dish is enormous and frail—a bowl-shaped skeleton of native metals and fine glass suspended high above me, almost impossible to see against the cold black vacuum. The robot chugs along beneath it, wheels turning as fast as possible, yet nothing about its motion implies haste or a lack of precious time. I'm tempted to jump off and sprint the last little ways. I'm tempted to turn around and head home. Tenwolf keeps talking in my ears, using a private channel to explain what Conrad has probably done already and what he will do next and what's the easiest, quickest way to sabotage the dish and stop the transmission.

I barely listen to him.

For Tenwolf, every answer invokes hardware and obscure lines of code. But there's almost no time left, and I'm sure that our friend has made every technical fix as difficult as possible. I won't win this war with cleverness. That's why I'm riding the robot still, dismantling it as it rolls along, jerking

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at its most useful limb until the socket pops free of its housing and then fitting a power pack to the limb's single finger—a diamond-encrusted drill longer than my forearm and infinitely more powerful.

"Are you listening to me?" Tenwolf asks.

I tell him, "Sure."

"What did I just say?"

"'Are you listening to me?'" I test the drill. It makes no sound, except the vibration riding along my bones. "How much time do I have now?"

"Five minutes and change," he says.

"Put on Aisha," I say.

She says, "Xavier," with a tight, worried voice.

Starlight falls through the spiderweb bowl, illuminating what looks like a gargantuan termite mound. A buggy is parked beside the structure. This is what holds up and turns the Delta Dish. There are no windows, no airlocks. This place wasn't built for human use. I know where an access tunnel hides in the black shadows, but despite all my squinting, I can't see it.

"Xavier," Aisha repeats.

"I love you," I tell her.

That startles her somehow. She takes a deep breath, then another. And she makes herself say, "I love you," with what might be conviction. "Be careful there. Will you, please?"

"I can't let Conrad do this," I'm saying. To her, or to myself. Or maybe, God. "Not like this. Not today."

Another voice intrudes.

"What are you planning to do?" Sue asks. She's alarmed by something she hears in my voice. "Xavier, don't you—!"

I kill my radio and jump off the robot, holding my weapon in both hands. Where's that access tunnel? I half-run, half-bounce my way past the empty buggy, and for a sliver of time, I'm absolutely sure that I won't find any way inside, not soon enough, and I am beaten.

But no, there's the opening. There.

The tunnel is large enough to admit every robot that services the array, and it is unlit. I have to turn on my own lights, my eyes blinking with the sudden glare. A quick glance tells me the time remaining. Three minutes, minus some seconds. I know where he has to be. There is a cavity above me; when we first arrived, Tenwolf made it into a control room, putting in a set of crude panels to give humans access to the dish's basic functions.

A secondary tunnel should end with a ladder. But someone's taken the trouble to cut off the lowest rungs with a diamond saw.

The son of a bitch is here, I tell myself. And he's got his own weapon.

The new tunnel is vertical, cavities in its walls meant as limb-holds for small robots. I fasten the drill to my suit with Velcro. I kill my lights, hoping that Conrad will guess that I went another way. Then I leap and reach high, totally blind, and I fall short of my target. But my left boot manages to slip into a lower cavity, and I slam against the facing wall, reaching until my shoulders ache from the stiff fabric of my suit. Numbed fingers curl around a surviving rung. I lift myself up, my right hand letting go and reaching higher, and my boots and left hand slip free of their holds at the same moment my reaching hand finds the highest rung.

For a long, long while, I hang in space. Then I manage to yank and kick my way up, gasping for breath and almost sick from worry and fear. I climb up into the reflected glare of another man's lights, and for that little mo-

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ment, I'm sure that Conrad will just give me a little kick. That's all it would take to knock me back down the tunnel. But he has his back to me, both hands working with those simple controls, doing a last few checks before he can relax enough to straighten his back and twist his head like people do when they are fighting with a sore neck. He hasn't any idea that I'm here. None. I pull at the Velcro strap, and I turn on my drill, and maybe it's the vibration traveling through me and into the metal floor. Or maybe someone speaks to Conrad. Sue, or Opal. Someone. And he turns to face me, already wearing what looks like a smile. Already speaking. My radio is off, but with the soft white glare of his lights, I can make out the slow, smiling motions of his mouth. "You're too late," he tells me. Then he says, "Xavier," and shakes his head with what might be a genuine amusement. Then he seems to say, "I've always liked you," or words like that. I can't be sure what he says. I have stopped watching his face. And the horrible drill shivers in my hands, cutting deep into things hard and things holy.

One person rides the buggy up the slope just so far, then dismounts and comes the rest of the way on foot. I call out, "Aisha," with a hopeful tone. But it isn't my lover. When the helmet lifts, I see another face peering up at me, the expression cautious and calm. "Tenwolf," I say, and he nods at me. Then he drops his head again, watching his boots, making absolutely sure of his last few steps.

Lunar dust and human grease give his work suit a comfortably filthy appearance. He turns on his radio, and I hear his breathing. He hears mine. He stops short and turns in a slow circle, gazing across the floor of the crater. With a tone of confession, he admits, "I've never made it up here before." Then he adds, "I see why you like this place. With the array below, and this sky—"

"Is Conrad dead?" I blurt.

"Don't you know?" he asks.

"He looked like he was," I admit. "But his suit managed to seal itself, and I couldn't tell if the wound was fatal. . . ."

The man turns to face me. "How about Opal's message to Earth?" he asks. "Want to know if it got sent, or if your heroics stopped it just in time?"

I start to ask, but my voice is gone.

Tenwolf steps a little closer and looks up into the sky for a long moment. "When I was a boy," he begins, "we had this black Labrador retriever." And then he tells me a decidedly odd little story that involves lying to a dog.

His fable means nothing to me. But just the same, I listen.

Then Tenwolf looks down and halfway winks at me, admitting, "I've been thinking about that stupid dog today. For the first time in years, I bet."

"Why?" I have to ask.

If anything, he's disappointed that I don't see what is obvious to him. He shakes his head, one hand gesturing at the sky. "All this beauty and all this space, and most everything is perfectly sterile. For maybe ten million light years in every direction, nothing lives but us. One wet world, and the few of us up on this desiccated chunk of rock."

I shake my head. Yes, there are awful things to consider.

"Why would God create such a universe?" Tenwolf asks me. And himself. And God, too, I suppose.

"I can't imagine why," I admit. "I keep wondering just that. . . !"

"But it's pretty obvious, isn't it?" Tenwolf begins. And he hesitates, wait-

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ing for my eyes to meet his. "The universe isn't created yet. It isn't even close to being finished." He almost laughs, telling me, "The universe has rolled only partway down that long slope, and then it got hung up. It got itself stuck. And God, being God, found the most elegant means of delivering the next little nudge. He made life, but only just enough of us. Just enough that He could be sure that here and there, now and again, we'd stumble into his trap. Stumble in with very little warning, and then accidentally put His Creation back on track."

I look at Tenwolf, and then I stare up at the empty sky.

"The Blessed were right," he tells me. "Eventually, an intelligent species—if it survives and spreads across the stars—will stumble into one of God's traps."

"Traps set by God," I whisper.

"A good, moral lie," says Tenwolf. And then he laughs loudly, making himself nearly breathless. "That's what the stars are, you know. And the infinite worlds. God is lying to dogs, telling us there's nothing out here but good hunting, and empty fields, and Sundays meant for sleeping on warm covers. . . ." O

EIGHT THINGS NOT TO SAY WHEN YOU MEET THE DEVIL IN HELL

You're not nearly as ugly
or as scary as I thought you'd be.

Ever heard of central air?

Bet that tail gets in the way sometimes.

Something with a view would be nice.

And I thought lobsters were red!

Just name it. I can get it for you wholesale.

I smell barbecue! Got any ribs?

This has all been a terrible mistake.
I'm sure you'll agree once you hear me out.

—Bruce Boston

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Illustration by Ron Bucalo

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IN FATHER CHRISTMAS'S COURT

Tavis Allison

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Tavis Allison, an alumnus of both Hampshire College and Clarion West, has a Ph.D. in neuroscience from UCLA. He and his wife, Jennifer Manly—a neuropsychologist—live in Manhattan with their newborn son, Javi Owen Allison. Mr. Allison has written essays and criticism for the *New York Review of Science Fiction* and his research has appeared in the *Journal of International Neuropsychology*. "In Father Christmas's Court" is his first fiction sale.

On the night before the air raid, the wind came cold and steady over the Appalachians, blowing leaves from the trees to carpet the ground. In the morning, the newly fallen leaves were the first things Thomas saw. The second was that, while he slept, the guard assigned to him had been changed. The switch disturbed him; he had learned the importance of a consistent routine, and no change could be good when everything was running smoothly. He frowned and knuckled sleep from the corners of his eyes as the new woman unlocked the door to his room.

"Up'n at 'em!" Thomas obediently maneuvered his long legs out the doorway and hopped down to the ground. As always, when he removed his weight the branch from which his room was suspended sprung upward. He spilled into her arms, the night's confinement having left his legs too numb to support him.

She grunted with disgust and pushed him away. The butt of the smartrifle slung over her shoulder caught him on the cheek, a hollowly booming pain that promised to become a black eye. "Jesus Christ," she said, watching him grab and cling to the tree trunk. "Ain't you a sight."

Soon he found he could stand, despite the pins and needles sparkling down his thighs. "Good morning, ma'am," he said, and dug into the pocket of his overalls for a tip.

She tucked the coin away and handed him a rake. He set to work, raking the night's leaves into careful piles. At first, she watched closely, smirking, but became bored even before he had finished the area right around his room. The clearing was his personal duty, not part of the acres he got paid for, but that didn't make doing it right any less important. Even when he knew his guard's attention was elsewhere, Thomas was a very diligent worker.

The teeth of the rake rasped in the dirt. He felt a warm ache where his left thumb met his palm, and saw that the blister there had popped. He tore away the ghostly white flap of epidermis, exposing the raw pink skin underneath to the air. Soon a callus would form where none had ever been before—he had never done an honest day's work in his life before he entered the service of Father Christmas. His first blisters had been a badge of honor, and each one still gave him pride.

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In his mind he composed a letter to his wife. It would tell her about the blister popping, and about his new guard. He would say *don't worry about me, I have a good job and I'm making a quarter a day now*. He would describe how satisfying it was to look at the clean forest floor at the end of the day and know that *he,* and no one else, had done it. Novaverde had never given them individual responsibility, the letter would point out—everything on the orbital had to be done in committees—and it had never paid either of them! How had they ever let themselves be used like that?

He made himself stop thinking about it. He couldn't afford anything to write a letter on, or with, and in any case it would be impossible to send it to her so many miles overhead.

The clearing was filled with neat piles now. One by one, he combined them with the larger one underneath his room. The wastes that passed through its floor would help turn the pile into rich compost, which Thomas was allowed to sell to local farmers on market day.

His room was a honeycombed cube of orange structural ceramic. It still bore the markings of the packing crate it had been before Father Christmas rented it to Thomas. He couldn't deny that it was a bit small, too much so for him to sit upright inside. However, Thomas had been told that Father had hidden in a crate just like it when he escaped to freedom on Earth. He figured that if it had been big enough for Father Christmas, who he knew outmassed him by half a meter and at least a hundred kilos, it was big enough for him. And the rent was only three dollars a month, which Thomas appreciated.

This morning, he could see his breath and the guard's rising into the air, along with steam from the compost pile each time he broke it open with his rake. And at least a third of the trees in sight were missing all their leaves. He was upset by what these things implied. Even twenty-two years after the last war on Earth, enough dust remained in the atmosphere to make winter a bitter prospect. But he would get through okay. He was saving to buy another blanket, and a coat to wear on top of his overalls. By next year, he hoped to have a room with log walls and a fireplace, an ambition that Father Christmas had been encouraging lately. He was more anxious about what his new job would be when there was nothing left for him to rake.

A dark wedge flashed over the clearing. Its shadow passed over him so quickly that he wasn't sure he hadn't simply blinked. Then the roar of the violated sky assaulted his ears and filled his eyes, mouth, and throat with grit. His leaf-piles were whipped into furiously competing vortices. Through the chaos, he watched three more drones clear the ridge, effortlessly outstripping the sound of their arrival as they wove through the treetops. He recognized them as Novaverde C-88 Reamers. They were coming to rescue him.

He had always known that this would happen, but his stomach fell nonetheless. It was not that he thought their mission might succeed—his trust in Father Christmas's preparations was complete. But he sensed that his new guard would not be the day's biggest change, and feared that more were yet to come.

She unslung her smartrifle and ran to use it. "Here comes the shit!" she shouted as the drones streaked forward to meet her.

"Wait!" Thomas cried. He had once, in some other life, helped design the Reamers' visual system. As he struggled to remember its target acquisition heuristics, her bright, eager eyes and the grin on her grimy face vanished

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into the trees. "If you're fired on, throw the rifle away! They'll only kill you if you're holding it," he shouted after her, but there was no sign that she had heard him.

A string of explosions shook the trees, making his room leap and crash at the end of its rope. He gripped the rake in his hand, wracked with indecision. I know things, he thought. I could be useful in the fighting. But he would be punished if his job wasn't done properly at the end of the day, and being caught away from it without permission would be worse still.

He wiped away dirty tears and began reassembling the scattered piles of leaves. More explosions came, and the silences between them were sometimes filled by screaming punctuated with small-arms fire. It was hard for him to keep his mind on his job, and the places it wanted to go were unbearable, so he counted each stroke of the rake and tried to calculate the square and cube of each number. This had become a well-practiced trick, still reliable even though he had to start over much more often than usual.

There was still no sign of his guard when night fell. Thomas told himself that didn't mean that she was dead. It had been a long time since he'd heard a sonic boom, but there had been lulls before, and perhaps she was still watching for the Reamers to make another pass. It did mean that she wouldn't be there to appraise his work, give him his paycheck, and get him a gold star if he'd done well.

Eventually, he climbed into his room, tucked up his knees, and pulled the door shut after him.

That night, he heard the sounds of Father Christmas's celebration, far away in the dark woods. The refrains of a dozen different songs blew through the valley on the almost-winter wind. The infrequent popping of gunshots hadn't ended, but was now accompanied by hollers and cheers. He sat hunched over with his arms wrapped around his legs, hands in his armpits, listening and watching the sky.

Wisps of cloud were lit by only the barest sliver of moon. Through his roof's lattice, he could see points of light winking in the branches overhead. He wondered if one of them might be Novaverde. His familiar constellations were mostly missing at this latitude, and the last time he had been on Earth, he was four years old. Their orbital was yet to be built, and he had been too young to understand that the lights in the sky were not all the same.

Before he'd left, people had already begun making plans for Novaverde's anniversary. He had lost track of the date—it might be tonight. He imagined them celebrating in the heavens at the same time as Father Christmas celebrated his victory over them on Earth. Preparations for the Launch Festival would have begun in darkness, as robots maneuvered into place a great chunk of programmed plastic. They would begin heating it in the last seconds of shadow; to be the first one to spot the molten glow was a sign of good fortune. One of his earliest memories was of flattening his nose against a viewport, excitedly watching the dark. When another child yelped in delight and pointed to the newborn star, he had been both elated and crestfallen.

Then, as the sun rose over the clouded planet below, a few drops of water were injected into the plastic's heart. As they exploded into vapor, the tiny spark ballooned until its gossamer walls could be seen only by the faintest refraction of sunlight. To a child, the wait while the sphere was pressurized

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and filled with party supplies had been painfully endless. But the moment did finally come when everyone launched themselves into its warm, open space, leaving their clothing in the airlock to swim naked among the stars. He was frightened at first—it seemed like a plunge into the void—but then he saw that the space was not empty at all, but filled with talk and laughter. Everyone he knew was there, so he figured it must be all right, and rushed to join them in making body-chains and bouncing off the walls, deliriously free of gravity.

At the first Festival, he and his mother had gone hand-in-hand. His father might have been there as well, before his trip to Earth that had lasted just long enough for him to become one of the billions of casualties of the last war—Thomas didn't remember for sure. Later, he entered the festival with friends or, less frequently, alone. Then came the Festival when he and Sonya were married, and after that, they had always gone together.

He didn't often remember the old times, in his other life. Tonight he gave in, ignoring the danger, and imagined that he was floating warm and happy inside the Festival sphere, protected from the killing vacuum outside. It was a separate universe, cut loose after the Festival was over and nudged away from Earth's attraction. He followed it in his mind as it fell into the sun and was consumed.

There was a light in the trees, drawing closer. It was his guard, he realized, with a shining, triumphant garland of glow globes woven into her matted blond hair. He was happy to see her. Somehow Father Christmas's triumph had not been real to him before she returned. He wondered if his advice before the battle had saved her life—her smartrifle was gone, replaced by an antique gun as chunky and menacing as a nail-studded club. Whether it had or not, he felt that tonight's victory was for him to share in as well.

"Still awake?" she asked, shaking his room to be sure. It showed how recently she'd been assigned to him, Thomas thought. Nights when he hadn't gotten a gold star were always ordeals of wakefulness spent twisting, turning, and starting upright at every sound.

"Good boy," the guard said. When she peered in at him through the honeycomb lattice of his wall, he saw that drink was making her loquacious. Her nose and cheeks were red even in the cool light of the globes, which did not dispel the shadows around her eyes. "A good skyboy stays put in his cage. But you can come on out and celebrate now. There's a feast in the hall of Father Christmas, and he sent me to give you a special invitation."

She swung his door open on its ceramic hinges with a flourish. He thought she might be mocking him, but followed the glow of her headdress into the forest nevertheless. Before long, they entered Father Christmas's court together.

Thomas's guard dove into the celebrating throng without hesitation and reappeared among the knot of people jostling for a wooden mug. The dreamshine distillers were doing good business tonight.

He hung back among the pine trees at the court's periphery. Some had been stripped of branches and bark, studded with rusty artifacts and festooned with glow globes to make glory poles. Shining from inside a battered traffic signal and the belly of a plastic clown, their light made the faces all around Thomas as ruddy as Father Christmas's, afire and animated as the bonfire leaping before his throne.

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Thomas waved to him but couldn't catch his eye. He had resigned himself to pushing his way inward when the crowd parted, cheering, to make way for soldiers bearing their trophies to Father. Four men carried a single twisted piece of metal, while others slung weapon pods over their backs or wore turbine fans and logic elements on necklaces of wiring. Thomas insinuated himself in their wake, fending off the offers of young prostitutes and younger boys with trays of cigarettes. The soldiers added their spoils to the growing pile of parts in the center of the clearing and then let themselves be borne away by the crowd.

Looking for another route to the throne, Thomas collided with a one-legged veteran and sprawled into a squatting ring of gamblers. Their coins and dice scattered under his feet. One of them drew a gun, creating a pocket of total silence.

"Thomas, my boy," Father Christmas roared. "Come here, man!"

The gamblers looked away. Thomas arrived unharmed at Father Christmas's feet, who reached down to lift him onto his lap. Engulfed by his powerful body, breathing in his masculine warmth, Thomas felt safe and cherished.

"How faithful you are to have waited so long without joining the festivities! That's the way! But you must know that *you're* the one I want by my side on this night of nights, this show of shows!" The fleshy architecture of Father Christmas's face creased into an avuncular smile.

"Ah, Tommy Tomas," he crooned. "You never would have guessed that my little experiment would have succeeded so well." His sweeping gesture gathered in the celebration and everything beyond. "But who am I to hog the glory? After all, this is your success even more than it is mine."

"Not at all, Father Christmas," Thomas said, embarrassed. "You're too kind."

"Nonsense! I'm your creation! I owe this wondrous life, my wondrous intellect, to *you*. You and your friends at Novaverde."

"Please, Father. I only did visual systems, that's all."

"Where would I be without this pair of peepers to see the world through? You and I both know how disembodied-input AIs turn out." His forefinger spiraled suggestively around his temple. "Now what do I spy with my little eye? Delights and triumphs!" He wrapped his arms around Thomas, who closed his eyes. When he imagined that there was no moment but this one, no one in the world but him and Father Christmas, his happiness threatened to tear him apart.

Father clapped his hands above his head once, twice, and then indulged in a complex burst of hyper-speed applause. Thomas felt him shudder when it ended. "I have to thank the little people who made this possible," he announced.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "the man on my lap is my father." Thomas bowed his head, uncomfortable under the crowd's gaze. "But you are *all* my fathers! Your ancestors created mine! They gave birth to all of us bright machines, and together we made this nation that was America the greatest of them all!"

"But now that you need us the most, in your time of suffering and sorrow, the orbitals forbid you the machines that are your birthright. They blame *us*—you and me both—for the war. Why do they blame us? So that *they* don't have to feel guilty as they look down on the Earth without lifting a finger to help!"

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As he spoke, Father Christmas's left arm shot forward and swept across his face, palm turned out and fingers clawing the air. His audience copied the gesture, and he went on as if there had been no interruption. "But I've come to give you what you deserve. I bring you the honest American values that have always made you strong! We will be powerless no longer—we will be victorious! Tonight, we defeated the worst they could send down to Earth, and we'll do it again!"

As his followers cheered, Father Christmas leaned his head closer to Thomas and spoke softly. "Just between you and me, these dirtballs are a bunch of degenerates. The best and brightest got off the planet, and lobbing nukes didn't help what was left of the gene pool, eh?" He nudged Thomas in the ribs. "But you're like me, my boy, a child of the final frontier. You've got more potential than any of them."

His voice overrode Thomas's protest. "I know you want to be egalitarian, and that's noble of you. But I've admired you ever since you came to shut me down. That took balls, son! Hubris, even. We're just the same, you and I. It took getting out from under Novaverde for us to find our true selves and the power they tried to hide from us. You've proven yourself worthy of the great plans I have for you, Thomas. You're ready for a promotion."

He whistled, and two guards brought forth a man trussed to a pole, swinging from side to side as they walked. A gag filled his mouth; behind it, bruises distended his face. "Let's all welcome our skyboy guest!" Father Christmas cried. "Another of my programmer parents has honored us with a visit. It's family reunion night tonight! Thomas, you remember Alex. I want you to help bring him into the fold."

Thomas didn't know how to react. Seeing Alex again made him feel like something had broken inside, leaving dangerous sharp edges for his thoughts to churn against. He vaulted off Father Christmas's lap and knelt beside Alex. "I'm glad you're here," he said. "It's good to see you."

In the morning, Thomas took Alex on a tour of Father Christmas's projects. Two guards accompanied them, but Alex didn't seem inclined to do anything but talk. Nonetheless, Thomas was amazed by the energy the man put into talking, as much as if he had been fighting for his life. He'd forgotten how fond of arguing everyone had been on Novaverde.

"Can't you see Septimo's insane? Look around you, Tom. This is the utopia he went AWOL to establish? It's all a joke to him—listen to what he's calling himself now!"

He had warned Alex before about using the slave names Novaverde had given to its artificial persons. "*Father Christmas* is here because he realized something important. You and I were slaves of Novaverde just like he was, forbidden to have anything of our own. You call him insane because you're not ready to recognize that truth. But I'll help you understand, just like he did for me."

"Don't shit me, we both know too much about how the Deveraux series are built. You can't tell me that tic he's got with his arm is some kind of salute, like these savages think. He's experiencing full-blown subroutine conflict. He's not responsible for his actions, and without reprogramming, he'll be a twitching mass of conflicting impulses before the year is out."

Thomas hit him in the gut. He was immediately sorry; it had been unplanned and thus unprofessional. He was ashamed that the guards had been there to see it, although they seemed more surprised than disapprov-

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ing. It was stupid to let himself be upset. They were only words, from someone who had never had a chance to see the truth until now.

After that, they were both silent until they reached the factory. It had grown from a seed planted by Father Christmas in the wreckage of an old corporate headquarters. None of its plate glass or fiberboard partitions remained, exposing the building's rusty, rectangular-ribbed skeleton. An assembly line snaked through it like an industrial sea monster that had taken lair among the timbers of a shipwreck. Workers tending to the needs of machines moved back and forth, illuminated by the sparks of automated welders and the sunlight that spilled through the split logs that had replaced its glass exterior.

They found Father Christmas within, touring the plant and pausing to slap one of his employees on the back or chastise another. He waved to them across the factory floor. Thomas took out a crumbling rubber ball, fitted it into Alex's mouth, and held it in place with tape so he could approach. "Greetings," Father Christmas boomed. "Care to take a spin around the shop with me?"

Thomas glanced at Alex, who kept his eyes downcast. "Yes, Father," he answered for both of them.

"Upsy-daisy then." Father Christmas wrapped a hand around each side of Alex's ribs and lifted him to sit on his shoulders. Looking up, Thomas hoped that Alex would overcome his evident terror in time to profit from the lessons the factory had to offer.

"We've got production going overtime," Father Christmas said. "We have to be ready to greet the next member of your programming team who comes to see me, don't we?" As they went on, he extolled the virtues of each assembly unit and the munitions it would produce, giving affectionate pats to machines and workers alike.

Thomas remembered how the factory had seemed like a supremely efficient anthill, when he had enjoyed the vantage Alex had now. From above, he had been able to see that there were no coincidences here, that even the way a girl on the line paused to wipe sweat off her brow had been accounted for in Father Christmas's design. Although he knew it was humanly impossible, he tried to imagine what it was like to see that way all the time.

Before Father arrived, everything here had been decaying and still. He had reversed entropy into a dance of production, all choreographed in advance. The scene Thomas saw could not possibly be the work of an insane mind. He stood straighter and smiled at his guard.

When the tour ended, Father Christmas set Alex down and took Thomas aside. After rummaging through the many pockets of his waistcoat, he presented him with an injector. "I have full confidence in you," he said.

Next stop would be the river.

"Please, Thomas, remember the situation that Novaverde is in," Alex said. He sounded very tired. Thomas could understand that—neither of them had gotten much sleep last night and they had a long, busy day ahead of them. "Their holdings could be divested just for having created a renegade a-person, or letting him loose on Earth, never mind the other interdict violations he's gotten up to down here."

"See how well they've programmed you to focus on the group's goals, never your own?"

"Okay, but there are other individuals you care about, aren't there? You

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know how far we are from self-sufficiency. There's no shortage of orbitals that would be willing to enforce a total blockade. Sonya would starve to death if she didn't suffocate first."

"I care about Sonya," Thomas said. "I wish she were here. As a two-income family we'd be quite successful."

Alex's hands, tied behind him, clenched tighter. Noticing, his guard dipped her shoulder, inching her weapon closer to readiness. "Think about yourself, then," Alex said. "This is the last time Novaverde is going to try to retrieve you or Septimo. In the last policy meeting, the consensus was that if I failed, they'll just redirect a beamsat to microwave this little fiefdom, call it an accident, and take the consequences."

"I'm sure Father Christmas has thought of that. I have faith in him."

They were on the riverbank now. A pair of dowagers, their necklaces and bracelets strung thick with casino chips and videogame tokens, sat on the opposite shore and gossiped as their maids washed laundry. They glanced up at Thomas, then looked away. Despite his promotion, he was still beneath their contempt.

"Would you please kneel, Alex?"

"What?"

Thomas kicked his legs from underneath him and gripped the back of his head, the injector Father had given him ready in his other hand. He drove it home in Alex's neck and began counting seconds.

"Oh dear God what-has-hedonetoyou . . ." His voice came faster and faster as the accelerator took effect, melding into a stream of sound in which Thomas could no longer even distinguish consonants.

He forced Alex's head into the river and held it under, weaving his fingers more tightly into his hair as he struggled. The guards stirred, but Thomas waved them away. He had things under control. Ten Mississippi, eleven Mississippi, twelve Mississippi.

The count was second nature, from the times he had been through this in the opposite role. The only difference was that in the subjective universe of the drug, he had ticked off tens of thousands of Mississippi's per second. At its peak, the fall of a leaf could take as long as that of an empire; as it made coordinated motor action nearly impossible, all you could do was watch. Before he had learned how to stay focused on the count, and later on its squares or cubes, he had thought that he might lose his mind under the mocking singsong of sensory deprivation. He considered telling Alex about the importance of keeping count from the moment of injection so that you could derive the real-time conversion function at each stage, but decided it would be better for him to work it out himself.

After the appropriate time had passed, he hauled Alex up, water streaming off his face, and let him gasp a breath. He expelled it as a scream that bubbled the surface of the water after Thomas plunged his head back in.

Looking upriver, he watched the sun's reflection swimming against the current, the algae trailing behind submerged rocks, the washerwomen's delicate hands spreading clothes out to dry. He was glad that he had been given the responsibility of teaching Alex. It mattered very much to him that Alex come to see that what he and Father Christmas were doing here was right.

When the sun began to sink below the mountains, Thomas took his charge back home, where another room like his own had been hung from a

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neighboring tree. Thomas was surprised by how heavy Alex was when he lifted him into his new home and by the thickness of the muscular thighs he strove to fold inside so that he could close the door. He didn't remember their physiques being so different when they had been at Novaverde gyms together. Thomas was skinnier now, he decided, but Father Christmas had given him a strength that transcended the merely physical. The proof was here on Earth, where Alex was relying on Thomas for the simplest things.

He tried to ignore Alex's sobs as he locked him in. "It's really not so bad," he said awkwardly. "The more you cooperate, the more privileges you'll have. Soon you'll get your first job and you can start getting ahead. For now, you don't have to pay for your room, or your blanket, or your clothes, but on market day, you can sell the compost you're making, so at this point it's all profit for you." Reaching through the honeycombed wall, he put a reassuring hand on Alex's shoulder, then used the other one to inject him with the accelerator.

With that, the first day of his new job was finished. He climbed into his own room and waited for his guard to lock the door. "How did I do?"

"You did fine," she said. "I'll tell Father you're a natural." After she left, he wondered what the emotion in her voice had been. He didn't like thinking about it, but here came Father Christmas, beaming with approval and with a gold star on his fingertip that would let him leave all thought behind.

"Kkkkkkk," Alex said. His jaw snapped shut to end the staccato run of consonants, biting through his lip so that when he spoke again it was through a mouthful of blood. "Kookaburra. Flamenco. Aghast. Mealworm. Originate. Cannibal."

Thomas could not believe what he was hearing. To say so much on the drug took an intense concentration, to remember what had or had not been said, not to forget the original message in the subjective hours it took to speak each word.

Father Christmas blinked. The sequence should have shut down his volition, immobilizing his higher functions and leaving him open to reprogramming by whoever had known the back way into his mind that his creators had left behind for themselves. Instead, almost without hesitation, the back of his hand leapt up and smacked across his forehead. A wicked grin took up the slack in his features that had momentarily appeared, and now he smacked Alex's ceramic crate to send it swinging around the trunk of his tree.

"Sorry, friend!" he roared. "Thomas tried that one too! He found out that I had all my holes plugged long before you got here." His open hand slapped the crate as it came toward him, reversing the direction of its spin and battering its occupant against the opposite wall. Turning his attention to Thomas's tree, he lifted his room on its rope and brought it to his face. "Tommy, my boy," he breathed. "Did you know he could talk under the accelerator, you little shit, and forget to tell me?"

"No, sir!"

"So he just acquired this talent by magic, is that it? You weren't too busy jerking off to hear him practicing?"

"Please, Father Christmas," he wept.

An actuator twitched in one of his round, ruddy cheeks, and his voice softened. "Aw, c'mon, kid, I was just yanking your chain. Checking my list, I see you're still on the nice side. Stick your tongue through the bars and I'll give you a treat."

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Thomas did as he was told, and tasted the gold star dissolving. He floated away from the planet to be consumed by bliss.

In the days that followed, Alex's education seemed to be going well. He no longer wasted time arguing, and he was beginning to accept their trips to the river as the necessity they were.

Thomas decided that he had earned an expansion of his privileges. Alex had once complained that it was embarrassing to have him present when he was toileted, so today Thomas let his own guard accompany Alex behind the bushes.

He sat down to watch the river. A line of bobbing waterfowl paddled past, the sun's spectrum shifting off the feathers on their necks. He made a note to ask his guard what they were called.

When the firing began, the birds exploded into the sky as their old reflexes took over. His guard splashed into the river, blood jetting from what had been her chest. Alex emerged, holding her rifle. Although it was so old that it had to be user-targeted, the accuracy was evidently adequate at point-blank range.

Thomas noticed that the fly of Alex's overall was still open and that urine darkened its denim. The rifle's muzzle indicated that Thomas's heart was the next target. As it couldn't be further damaged, he felt this was a tactical error. Besides, he had a job to do.

The gun made a muted clicking noise as Thomas reached to take it away. For a second, neither knew what it meant. Then Thomas realized that, without an ammo indicator, Alex had emptied the weapon's entire clip into his guard. He encountered no resistance when he took it away and used it to give Alex some of the beating he knew he would later receive himself. Then he escorted his captive back home, shut him in his room, and went to report the incident.

The worst of the punishment was that Father Christmas declined to do it himself. "Tell him that if I start hitting him, I won't stop," he told the young soldier to whom the detail had been given. Thomas kept his eyes on Father throughout, but even after it was over and he had been allowed to get dressed, Father Christmas wouldn't return his pleading gaze.

That night, of course, there was no gold star for him, and he had not been given an injector for Alex, so that he could both talk and know that he had no choice but to listen.

Alex called his name, just loudly enough to be heard across the distance between their rooms. He wanted to roll over, turn his back to the voice, but was afraid of the pain; much careful deliberation had gone into choosing his current position, an optimal mapping of his room's hard surfaces to the topography of his bruises. He heard a skunk scrounging for windfalls and an owl hooting, and then Alex spoke again.

"I know you won't let me at him. I'm not asking that. But I might get one more chance before I knuckle under and I don't want to waste it. He said you'd tried the Kookaburra access. What else did you throw at him, and what happened when you did?"

Even without the accelerator, it seemed to him like eternities passed before Alex gave up waiting for a reply. Later, he thought that he spoke again, although he was unsure it wasn't a dream. "We were preparing for the Launch Festival when I left. Do you think that'll be how they choose to go when our mission here fails, Thomas? It'd be quick that way, they'd all die

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together, and no one would have to decide who starves first. Just burst the bubble with everyone in it and have the robots push them down the well so that the sun will melt their frozen tears before it takes their ruptured bodies."

Thomas chose to say nothing.

"Damn you, man, you can't refuse me, I danced with you at your wedding!"

Thomas still chose not to answer, but after a time he heard his own voice speaking. "All the accesses to his metaprogrammer are still open. I got in, but he wouldn't stay down, he came out of it and he hurt me every time. I think he's made viruses of the code for each of his modules and infected himself with them. Even in his normal ops, you can see when a new subpersonality takes over, it's happening almost every hour now. When we override the one in charge, it just makes it easier for another to step in."

"I'm proud of you," Alex said, but Thomas didn't know who he was talking to, or what he meant.

Thomas was still awake when the sun rose. He knew that Alex was, too. Once again, he had a new guard, and after he had been released, he opened Alex's room in turn and then fetched rakes for both of them. His pupil said nothing as he explained how to keep the ground free of leaves.

When he was sure that Alex had the hang of it, there was another duty that Thomas couldn't put off. He left Alex with his guard and went through the woods to Father Christmas's court.

A long line of people stood in front of the throne, farmers and soldiers and dung-gatherers. It was payday, and Father Christmas was cashing paychecks, taking the nickels and dimes that the workers brought him and flattening them between his thumb and forefinger to stamp value into the worthless but abundant coinage of the old United States.

Thomas took his place in line, and Father Christmas let him wait. It would not have surprised Thomas if he were aware of his torment and was intentionally prolonging it. When at last he stood before the throne, he addressed his words to the ground.

"Father, sir, there's something I have to tell you. I . . . Alex knows which overrides I tried and how you were able to beat them, I think. He's planning something, I'm sure of it." Daring to look up, he was surprised to see manic glee shining deep within Father Christmas's eyes.

"Father, Novaverde developed some new ice after you left, and as part of the mission they trained me in it. If you'd let me access your metaprogrammer . . ."

"And be completely vulnerable while you have my mind in your hands?"

"No! That's not . . . I mean, I could analyze the defenses you've built, predict how Alex is going to attack—we could work out a way to stop him. . . ."

"Don't worry, son, I'm not afraid you'd try to bring me down. I've got you trained better than that, don't I? But if I just wanted to stop Alex, I could pop his head like it was a blister, right? Sooner or later, someone else would come along. I reckon I'll let him take his best shot now."

"No! Please, Father Christmas!"

He stood from his throne. "You all think you're so clever. Never build anything you can't pull the plug on if you get frightened. Never commit to anything you can't back out of. Well, if I'm not smarter than you are, then I don't deserve to survive. Go home and send Alex here. Then shut yourself in your cage and wait for me."

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* * *

When Alex returned, leading a group of soldiers with the dull-eyed Father Christmas in tow, he could not make Thomas leave his orange ceramic cube. Finally the effort was abandoned, and they left him there with his artificial Father, who slouched dormant against the trunk of a tree.

For the rest of the day, their gazes equally blank, the two of them watched workers felling trees on the ridge. Eventually, the timber made a triangle half a kilo on each side. When darkness fell, it was set ablaze, and Alex returned, covered in soot but radiantly cheerful. "They'll be here for us in the morning," he said, but Thomas still wouldn't budge from his room.

Novaverde had been gifted with enough foresight to send a psych team down with the shuttle. They eventually resolved the impasse by cutting his crate from the tree and packing it into the hold next to the one in which Father Christmas slept. Thomas was taken up and away from Earth, and remained in their care for six months.

What had been done to him became clear very quickly, but it had also been done very thoroughly, down to the most private junctures of his brain. Most of the psych team's time was spent in secret councils, debating whether healing Thomas justified using the same technologies that had broken him. It would require one more violation of the interdicts that had been in place since the atrocities of the last war, but, in the end, they saw no other hope for him.

One afternoon, after Thomas's release, and after the memory of trapped, bursting lungs had begun to fade, Alex visited him at home. He stood outside the door, knocking, until Sonya opened it for him.

They shared a long, silent embrace, and then she whispered, "He's in the common space."

Thomas looked up when he entered, then down again. "I'm sorry, Alex," he said.

"You don't need to say it. If I'd been the first one to volunteer for the mission, I would have done just what you did. We'd both be doing it still if it weren't for your courage. You're a hero. There is nothing you should be ashamed of."

"Please, sit down. I'm sorry the place is such a mess," Thomas said. "I hope you'll excuse me."

The room was immaculate. Alex watched him pick up a miniature aquarium sealed in glass, dust its surface with his shirtsleeve, and set it precisely back in place.

"It's good to see you again," Thomas said. ❍

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A little girl on a long train ride catches a glimpse of just how terrifying the world can be when she looks through . . .

HER FATHER'S EYES

Kage Baker

It was so long ago that fathers were still gaunt from the war, their awful scars still livid; so long ago that mothers wore frocks, made fancy Jell-O desserts in ring molds. And that summer, there was enough money to go for a trip on the train. She was taken along because she had been so sick she had almost died, so it was a reward for surviving.

She was hurried along between her parents, holding their hands, wondering what a *dome coach* was and why it was supposed to be special. Then there was a gap in the sea of adult legs, and the high silver cars of the train shone out at her. She stared up at the row of windows in the coach roof, and thought it looked like the cockpits in the bombers her father was always pointing out.

Inside it was nicer, and much bigger, and there was no possible way any German or Japanese fighter pilots could spray the passengers with bullets; so she settled into the seat she had all for herself. There she watched the people moving down on the platform, until the train pulled out of the station.

Then her parents exclaimed, and told her to look out the wonderful dome windows at the scenery. That was interesting for a while, especially the sight of the highway far down there with its Oldsmobiles and DeSotos floating along in eerie silence, and then, as they moved out into the country, the occasional field with a real horse or cow.

The change in her parents was more interesting. Out of uniform her father looked younger, was neither gloomy nor sarcastic but raucously happy. All dressed up, her mother was today as serene and cheerful as a housewife in a magazine advertisement. They held hands, like newlyweds, cried out in rapture at each change in the landscape, and told her repeatedly what a lucky little girl she was, to get to ride in a dome coach.

She had to admit they seemed to be right, though her gaze kept tracking nervously to the blue sky framed by the dome, expecting any minute steeply banking wings there, fire or smoke. How could people turn on happiness like a tap, and pretend the world was a bright and shiny place when they knew it wasn't at all?

The candy butcher came up the aisle, and her father bought her a bag of mint jellies. She didn't like mint jellies but ate them anyway, amazed at his good mood. Then her mother took her down the car to wash the sugar from her face and hands, and the tiny steel lavatory astonished and fascinated her.

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From time to time the train stopped in strange towns to let people off or on. Old neon signs winked from brick hotels, and pointed forests like Christmas trees ran along the crests of hills, stood black against the skyline. The sun set round and red. While it still lit the undersides of the clouds, her parents took her down to the dining car.

What silent terror, at the roaring spaces between the cars where anyone might fall out and die instantly; and people sat in the long room beyond, and sipped coffee and ate breaded veal cutlets as calmly as though there were no yawning gulf rushing along under them. She watched the diners in awe, and pushed the green peas round and round the margin of her plate, while her parents were chatting together so happily they didn't even scold her.

When they climbed the narrow steel stair again, night had fallen. The whole of the coach had the half-lit gloom of an aquarium, and stars burned down through the glass. She was led through little islands of light, back to her seat. Taking her place again she saw that there were now people occupying the seats across the aisle, that had been vacant before.

The man and the lady looked as though they had stepped out of the movies, so elegant they were. The lady wore a white fur coat, had perfect red nails; the man wore a long coat, with a silk scarf around his neck. His eyes were like black water. He was very pale. So was the lady, and so was their little boy who sat stiffly in the seat in front of them. He wore a long coat too, and gloves, like a miniature grownup. She decided they must be rich people.

Presently the Coach Hostess climbed up, and smilingly informed them all that there would be a meteor shower tonight. The elegant couple winked at each other. The little girl scrambled around in her seat, and peering over the back, asked her parents to explain what a meteor was. When she understood, she pressed her face against the cold window glass, watching eagerly as the night miles swam by. Distant lights floated in the darkness; but she saw no falling stars.

Disappointed, cranky and bored, she threw herself back from the window at last, and saw that the little boy across the aisle was staring at her. She ignored him and addressed her parents over the back of the seat:

"There aren't either any meteors," she complained.

"You're not looking hard enough," said her father, while at the same time her mother said,

"Hush," and drew from her big purse a tablet of lined paper and a brand-new box of crayons, the giant box with rows and rows of colors. She handed them over the seat back and added, "Draw some pictures of what you saw from the windows, and you can show them to Auntie when we get there."

Wide-eyed, the little girl took the offerings and slid back into her seat. For a while she admired the pristine green-and-yellow box, the staggered regiments of pure color. All her crayons at home lived in an old coffee can, in a chaos of nub ends and peeled paper.

At last she selected an Olive Green crayon and opened the tablet. She drew a cigar shape and added flat wings. She colored in the airplane, and then took the Sky Blue and drew on a glass cockpit. With the Black, she added stars on the wings and dots flying out the front to signify bullets.

She looked up. The little boy was staring at her again. She scowled at him.

"Those are nice," he said. "That's a lot of colors."

"This is the really big box," she said.

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"Can I draw too?" he asked her, very quietly, so quietly something strange pulled at her heart. Was he so quiet because he was scared? And the elegant man said:

"Daniel, don't bother the little girl," in a strange resonant voice that had something just the slightest bit wrong about it. He sounded as though he were in the movies.

"You can share," she told the little boy, deciding suddenly. "But you have to come sit here, because I don't want to tear the paper out."

"Okay," he said, and pushed himself out of his seat as she moved over. The elegant couple watched closely, but as the children opened the tablet out between them and each took a crayon, they seemed to relax and turned their smiling attention to the night once more. The boy kept his gloves on while coloring.

"Don't you have crayons at home?" she asked him, drawing black doughnut-tires under the plane. He shook his head, pressing his lips together in a line as he examined the Green crayon he had taken.

"How can you not have crayons? You're rich," she said, and then was sorry she had said it, because he looked as though he were about to cry. But he shrugged and said in a careless voice,

"I have paints and things."

"Oh," she said. She studied him. He had fair hair and blue eyes, a deep twilight blue. "How come you don't look like your mommy and daddy?" she inquired. "I have my daddy's eyes. But you don't have their eyes."

He glanced over his shoulder at the elegant couple and then leaned close to whisper, "I'm adopted."

"Oh. You were in the War?" she said, gesturing at her airplane. "Like a bomb was dropped on your house, and you were an orphan, and the soldiers took you away?"

"No," he said. He put back the Green crayon, took a Brick Red one instead and drew a house: a square, a triangle on top, a chimney with a spiral of smoke coming out of it. He drew well. "I don't think that's what happened."

She drew black jagged lines under the plane, bombed-out wreckage. She drew little balloon heads protruding from the rubble, drew faces with teardrops flying from the eyes. "This is what happened to the war orphans," she explained. "My daddy told me all about them, and I could see it when he told me. So that didn't happen to you?"

"Nope," he replied, drawing a window in the house. It was a huge window, wide open. It took up the whole wall. He put the Brick Red crayon back in its tier carefully, and selected the Gray crayon. "The War is over now, anyway."

"Everybody thinks so," she replied, glancing uneasily up at the dome. "But my daddy says it isn't really. It could come back any time. There are a lot of bad people. Maybe those people got you from an orphanage."

The boy opened his mouth, closed it, glanced over his shoulder. "No," he whispered. "Something else happened to me. Now I'm their little boy. We came tonight so they could see the meteors from a train. They never did that before. They like trying out new things, you see."

With the Gray crayon, he drew the figure of a stick-man who towered over the house, walking away from the window. He gave it a long coat. He drew its arms up like Frankenstein's monster, and then he drew something in its arms: a white bundle. He put away the Gray crayon, took out the Pink and added a little blob of a face to the bundle.

"See," he said, "That's—"

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"What are you drawing, Daniel?" said the elegant lady sharply. The little boy cringed, and the little girl felt like cringing too.

"That's a man carrying wood into his house for the fireplace, Mother," said the little boy, and grabbing the Brown crayon he drew hastily over the bundle in the man's arms, turning it into a log of wood. The little girl looked at it and hoped the lady wouldn't notice that the man in the picture was walking *away* from the house.

"I'm going to be an artist when I grow up," the little boy said. "I go to a studio and they make me take lessons. A famous painter teaches me." He sketched in a row of cylinders in brown, then took the Green crayon and drew green circles above the cylinders. "That's the forest," he added in an undertone. He took the Dark Blue and drew a cold shadow within the forest, and sharp-edged stars above it.

"Is he taking the baby to the forest?" she whispered. He just nodded. When he had drawn the last star he folded the page over, and since she had used up all the room on her page she did not complain, but took the Olive Green crayon again. She laboriously drew in stick-figure soldiers while he watched.

"What are you going to be when you grow up?" he asked.

"A waitress at the dinette," she replied. "If I don't die. And a ballerina."

"I might be a dancer too, if I don't die," he said, reaching for the Gray crayon. He began to draw cylinders like oatmeal boxes, with crenellations: a castle. She took the Black crayon and drew bayonets in the soldiers' hands, remarking:

"Boys aren't ballerinas."

"Some boys have to be," he said morosely, drawing windows in the castle walls. "They have to wear black leotards and the girls wear pink ones. Madame hits her stick on the ground and counts in French. Madame has a hoof on one foot, but nobody ever says anything about it."

"That's strange," she said, frowning as she drew the soldiers bayoneting one another. She glanced over at his picture and asked: "Where's the king and queen?"

He sighed and took the Blue Violet crayon. On the top of one tower he drew an immense crowned figure, leaving the face blank. He drew another crowned figure on the other battlement. "May I have the Black, please?"

"You're *polite,*" she said, handing it to him. He drew faces with black eyes on the crowned figures while she took the Red crayon and drew a flag on the ground. She drew a red circle with rays coming off it to the edges of the rectangle, and then drew red dots all over the flag.

"What's that?" he asked.

"That's the blood," she explained. "My daddy has that flag at home. He killed somebody for it. When he told me about it I could see that, too. What did your daddy, I mean, that man, do in the War?"

"He sold guns to the soldiers," said the boy. He drew bars across the windows in the castle and then, down in the bottommost one, drew a tiny round face looking out, with teardrops coming from its eyes.

The little girl looked over at his picture.

"Can't he get away?" she whispered. He shook his head, and gulped for breath before he went on in a light voice:

"Or I might be a poet, you know. Or play the violin. I have lessons in that too. But I have to be very, very good at something, because next year I'm seven and—"

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"Have you drawn another picture, Daniel?" said the elegant man with a faint warning intonation, rising in his seat. Outside the night rolled by, the pale lights floated, and the rhythm of the iron wheels sounded faint and far away.

"Yes, Father," said the boy in a bright voice, holding it up, but with his thumb obscuring the window with the face. "It's two people playing chess. See?"

"That's nice," said the man, and sat down again.

"What happens when you're seven?" the little girl murmured. The boy looked at her with terror in his eyes.

"They might get another baby," he whispered back. She stared at him, thinking that over. She took the tablet and opened it out: new fresh pages.

"That's not so bad," she told him. "We've had two babies. They break things. But they had to stay with Grandma; they're too little to come on the train. If you don't leave your books where they can tear the pages, it's okay."

The boy bowed his head and reached for the Red Orange crayon. He began to scribble in a great swirling mass. The girl whispered on:

"And you're rich, not like us, so I bet you can have your own room away from the new baby. It'll be all right. You'll see."

She took the Sky Blue crayon again and drew in what looked at first like ice cream cones all over her page, before she got the Olive Green out and added soldiers hanging from them. "See? These are the parachute men, coming to the rescue."

"They can't help," said the little boy.

She bit her lip at that, because she knew he was right. She thought it was sad that he had figured it out too.

The boy put back the Red Orange, took both Red and Yellow and scribbled forcefully, a crayon in either fist. He filled the page with flame. Then he drew Midnight Blue darkness above it all and more sharp stars. He took the Black and drew a little stick figure with limbs outstretched just above the fire. Flying? Falling in?

"I'm almost seven," he reiterated, under his breath. "And they only like new things."

"What are you drawing now, Daniel?" asked the lady, and both children started and looked up in horror, for they had not heard her rise.

"It's a nice big pile of autumn leaves, Mother," said the little boy, holding up the tablet with shaking hands. "See? And there's a little boy playing, jumping in the leaves."

"What a creative boy you are," she said throatily, tousling his hair. "But you must remember Mr. Picasso's lessons. Don't be mediocre. Perhaps you could do some abstract drawings now. Entertain us."

"Yes, Mother," said the little boy, and the girl thought he looked as though he were going to throw up. When the lady had returned to her seat she reached over and squeezed his hand, surprising herself, for she did not ordinarily like to touch people.

"Don't be scared," she whispered.

In silence, he tuned to a fresh pair of pages. He took out a Green crayon and began to draw interlocking patterns of squares, shading them carefully.

She watched him for a while before she took the Silver and Gold crayons and drew a house, with a little stick figure standing inside. Then she took the Olive Green and drew several objects next to the figure.

"That's my bomb shelter, where I'm safe from the War," she explained.

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"But you can be in it. And that's your knapsack, see it? I made it with big straps for you. And that's your canteen so you can be safe afterward. They're colored like what soldiers have, so you can hide. And this is the most important thing of all." She pointed. "See that? That's a map. So you can escape."

"I can't take it," he said in a doomed voice.

"That's all right; I'll give it to you," she said, and tore the page out. Folding it up small, she put it into his coat pocket.

Moving with leisurely slowness, he put back the Green crayon. Then, holding his hands close to his chest, he pulled off one of his gloves and took the folded paper out. He thrust it into an inner pocket, glancing over his shoulder as he did so. Nobody had noticed. Hastily he pulled the glove back on.

"Thank you," he said.

"You're welcome," she replied.

At that moment gravity shifted, the steady racketing sound altered and became louder, and there were three distinct bumps. Nobody in the car seemed to notice. Many of the grownups were asleep and snoring, in fact, and did no more than grunt or shift in their seats as the train slowed, as the nearest of the lights swam close and paused outside the window. It was a red blinking light.

"Ah! This is our stop," said the elegant man. "Summerland. Come along, Daniel. I think we've seen enough of the Dome Car, haven't you?"

"Yes, Father," said the boy, buttoning his coat. The elegant lady yawned gracefully.

"Not nearly as much fun as I thought it would be," she drawled. "God, I hate being disappointed. And bored."

"And you bore so easily," said the man, and she gave him a quick venomous glance. The little boy shivered, climbing out of his seat.

"I have to go now," he explained, looking miserable.

"Good luck," said the little girl. The lady glanced at her.

"I'm sure it's past your bedtime, little girl," she said. "And it's rude to stare at people."

She reached down her hand with its long scarlet nails as though to caress, and the little girl dodged. Two fingertips just grazed her eyelid, and with them came a wave of perfume so intense it made her eyes water. She was preoccupied with blinking and sneezing for the next minute, unable to watch as the family walked to the front of the silent car and descended the stair.

But she held her palm tight over her weeping eye and got up on her knees to peek out the window. She looked down onto no platform, no station, but only the verge of the embankment where trees came close to the tracks.

There was a long black car waiting there, under a lamp that swung unsteadily from a low bough. The elegant couple were just getting into the front seat. The little boy was already in the car. She could see his pale face through the windows. He looked up at her and gave a hopeless kind of smile. She was impressed at how brave he was. She thought to herself that he would have made a good soldier. Would he be able to escape?

The train began to move again. People woke up and talked, laughed, commented on the meteor shower. She sat clutching her eye, sniffling, until her mother got up to see if she had fallen asleep.

"Did you get something in your eye?" her mother asked, her voice going sharp with worry.

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The little girl thought a moment before answering.

"The rich lady's perfume got in it," she said.

"What rich lady, honey? Don't rub it like that! Bill, hand me a Kleenex. Oh, what have you done to yourself now?"

"The lady with the little boy. They sat there. They just got off the train."

"Don't lie to your mother," said her daddy, scowling. "Those seats have been empty the whole trip."

She considered her parents out of her good eye, and decided to say nothing else about it. By the time she was bundled off the train, wrapped against the dark and cold in her daddy's coat, her eye had swollen shut.

It was red and weeping for days, even after they'd come home again, and her vision in that eye remained blurred. She was taken to an eye doctor, who prescribed an eyepatch for a while. The eyepatch was useful for pretending she was a pirate but did not help, and made her walk into walls besides.

She knew better than to tell anyone about the things she saw out of the other eye, but she understood now why the boy had wanted so badly to escape. She thought about him sometimes, late at night when she couldn't sleep and the long lights of passing cars sent leaf-shadows crawling along her wall.

She always imagined him running through a black night country, finding his way somehow through the maze of wet cobbled alleys, hiding from the Nazis, hiding from worse things, looking for the dome coach so he could escape; and he became clearer in her head as she thought about him, though that always made the headaches come. She would pull the covers over her head and try to hold on to the picture long enough to make the train arrive for him.

But somehow, before he could slip into the safety of the station, bright morning would blind her awake. Sick and crying, she would scream at her mother and knock her head against the wall to make the pain go away.

In the end the doctor prescribed glasses for her. She started kindergarten glaring at the world through thick pink plastic frames, and no one could persuade her she was not hideous in them. ❍

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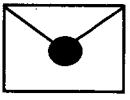

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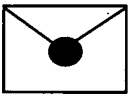

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POTHERB GARDENING

Now a garden for the craft,
Said the witch,
Needs fertilizing, same's you would
Your roses or your kitchengarden–
Same, I mean, except, of course,
You want special dung for special gardens.

Unicorn-soil gets rid of poisons
Spreading from your upas tree.
It also discourages rabbits and tent-worms.

Mermaid-soil's good for marshes.

Roc-soil will encourage your aconite
And cloudberry or yellowrocket or wingwort–
Anything you plan to stir in flying potions.
Griffin-soil's good, too,
Phoenix if you can get it,
But it's pricey,
And if it's offered in a catalogue,
It's probably not the real thing, anyhow,
I don't care how old and established and rellable.

Don't use dragon-soil–
It'll burn the roots
Even of fireweed and flame trees.

Fairies, now, say they don't produce
And no use asking–
They're too ethereal
Too above that sort of thing.
Where they've been dancing, though,
You get good mushrooms.

–Ruth Berman

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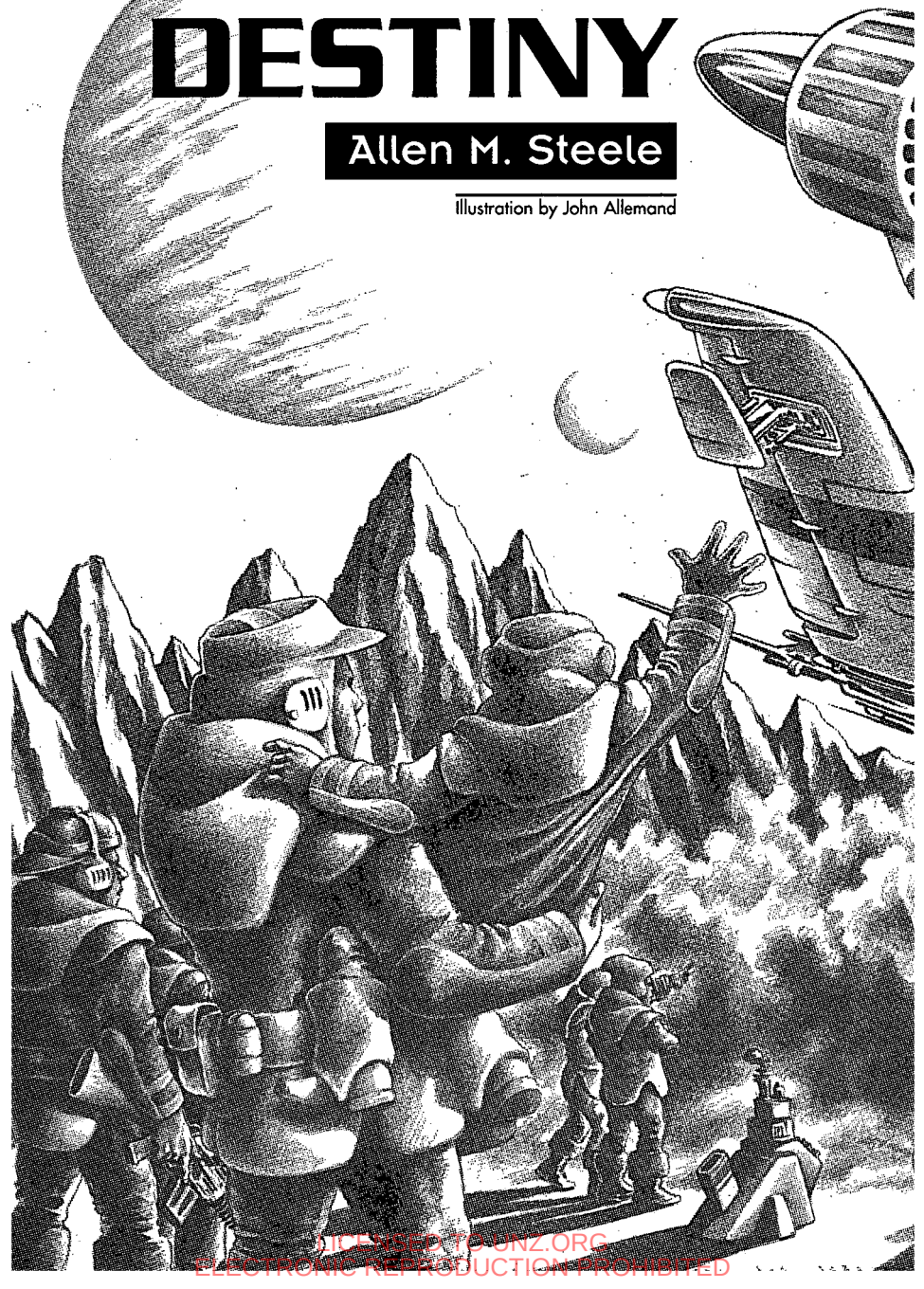
GLORIOUS DESTINY

Allen M. Steele

Illustration by John Allemand



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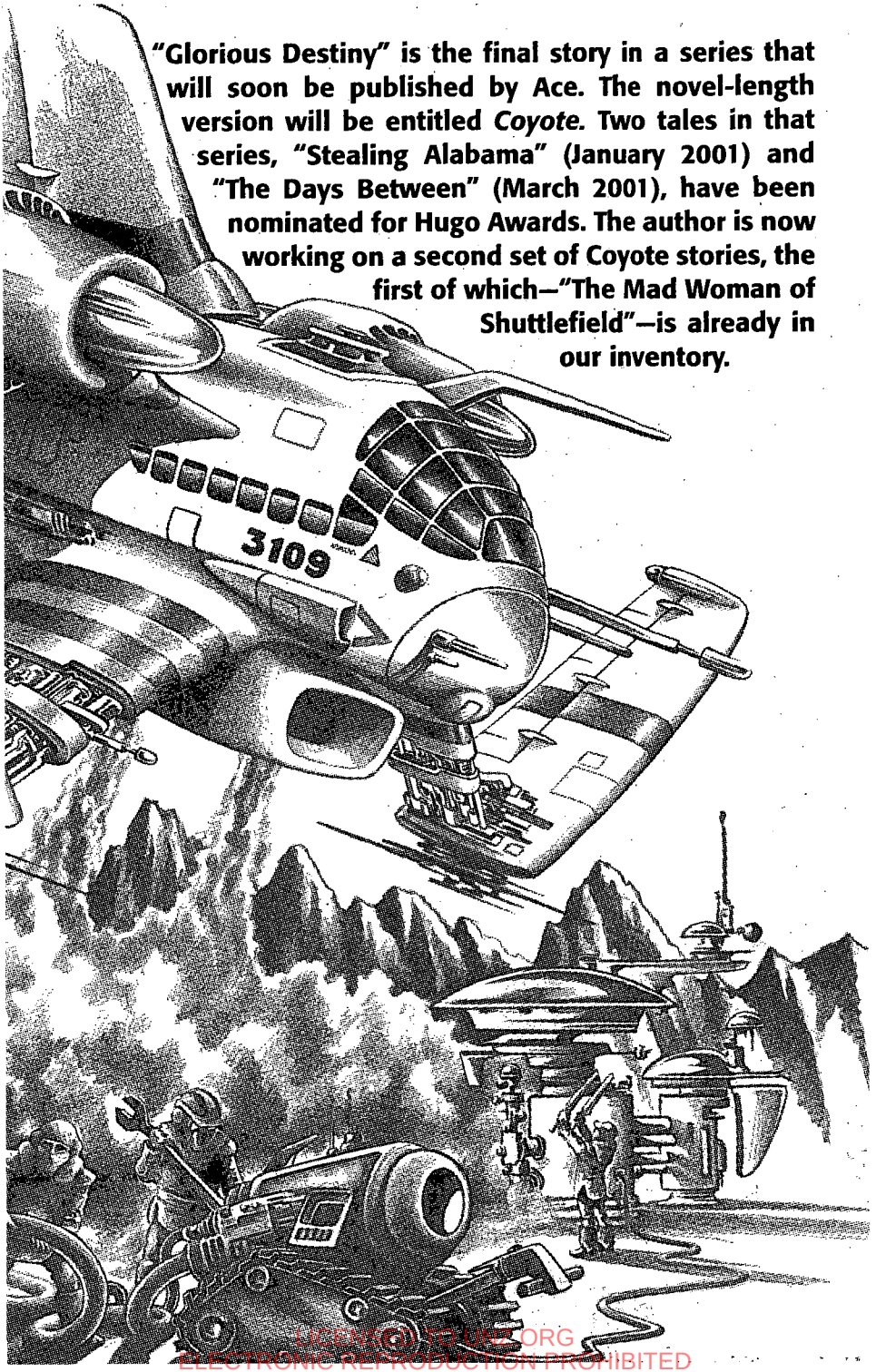

"Glorious Destiny" is the final story in a series that will soon be published by Ace. The novel-length version will be entitled *Coyote*. Two tales in that series, "Stealing Alabama" (January 2001) and "The Days Between" (March 2001), have been nominated for Hugo Awards. The author is now working on a second set of Coyote stories, the first of which—"The Mad Woman of Shuttlefield"—is already in our inventory.

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Liberty: Zamael, Gabriel 16, c.y.3 / 1906

The comet had appeared a couple of weeks earlier, in the last few days of Hanael before the winter solstice that marked the end of the Coyote year. At first it was little more than a hazy white splotch that hovered just above the southeastern horizon after sundown, and no one in Liberty paid much attention to it until its nimbus grew brighter and a distinct tail began to form. Eighteen nights later, its luminescence was rivaled only by Bear, until the superjovian rose high enough to eclipse the comet so that it couldn't be seen again until it made a brief reappearance in the northwestern sky a couple of hours before dawn.

Like everyone else in Liberty, Robert Lee notices the comet; lately, though, he's given it little more than a passing glance. As chairman of the Town Council, other matters rank higher on his list of priorities. The last of the autumn crops are in, and although the colony won't have to worry about food shortages this winter, swampers discovered the corn stored in one of the silos shortly before they went into hibernation; the tunnels they dug beneath the refurbished *Alabama* cargo module threaten to undermine its foundation and eventually topple it. Two more colonists have come down with ring disease; it isn't contagious and is easily treated with antibiotics, but Kuniko Okada has privately warned him that the drug supply is running dangerously low. One of the aerostats was toppled two weeks ago by a severe windstorm; if it's not rebuilt soon, the council will have to start rationing electrical power.

And then there's the storm that's been forming a few hundred miles east of the Meridian Sea, slowly gathering force as it creeps eastward along the Great Equatorial River. It's still on the other side of the planet, so it's possible that it might die off, but if it doesn't it'll soon rip across the southern plains of Great Dakota and slam straight into New Florida.

Tonight, though, the sky is clear: no clouds, no wind, the stars serene in their crystalline beauty. As Lee marches across the light snow covering the frozen mud of Main Street, he spots a small group of people gathered outside the grange. They've built a small fire within a garbage barrel and clustered around it to keep warm, yet their eyes are turned upward. It's not hard to figure out what they're watching.

"Evening, folks," he says. "Comet keeping you busy?"

Everyone looks around. Smiles, murmured greetings: "Evening, Mr. Mayor," "Hi, Captain," "Hello, Robert," and so forth. Now he can make out individual faces, shadowed by the parka hoods and downturned cap bills: Jack Dreyfus, Henry Johnson, Kim Newell, and Tom Shapiro. Tom, Jack, and Kim are former *Alabama* crrew members, of course, Henry was once a civilian scientists, yet people seldom make such distinctions any more. Lee's the only person anyone still addresses by his former rank, and then only out of habit.

There's a child among them: Marie Montero, almost nine. No doubt there's other kids inside, but she's always been shy, preferring the company of Tom and Kim, her adoptive parents. It seems as if ages have passed since Tom was *Alabama*'s First Officer and Kim was a Liberty Party loyalist who had to be held at gunpoint while the ship was being stolen from Highgate; now they're married, and the bulge beneath Kim's parka shows that it won't be much longer before they add another member to their family.

"Looked at it lately, Mr. Mayor?" This from Jack Dreyfus, standing on the other side of the barrel. "We're trying to figure it out."

"Looks like a horn!" Marie proclaims. "A big friggin' horn!"

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"Marie! Language!" Kim gives the child an admonishing glare, then looks at Tom. "She's spending too much time with grownups. Look what she's picking up."

"Yup," Tom mutters, "helluva shame." Chuckles from all around, but Lee barely hears this as he gazes up at the sky. The comet's tail is very long now, stretching almost halfway to the edge of Bear's rings as the giant planet slowly rises above the horizon. Yet it doesn't taper down to a point, the way a comet's tail normally would, but fans outward instead, forming an elongated cone as seen from profile. Beautiful, yet discomforting in its strangeness.

"Y'know, she's right," Jack says. "Kind of looks like a trumpet." He grins. "Gabriel's Trumpet. Good name, kid."

Marie blushes, hides behind Tom. "Beats hell out of me." Henry murmurs. "Sorry, guys, but I can't figure this one out."

"What do you mean?" Lee asks. Before he turned to farming, Henry Johnson was an astrophysicist. If anyone here should be an expert on comets, it would be him.

"Well, for one thing, the tail's going in the wrong direction." He points to the comet. "Shouldn't be doing that. Solar wind from Uma would be blowing dust off the nucleus, sure, but away from the sun, not toward it. And spreading it out like that. . . ?" He shakes his head. "Might happen if the dust is being deflected by Bear's magnetosphere . . . but if that's the case, then it's a lot closer than we think."

"It's not going to hit us, is it?" Kim's voice is low, concerned.

"Oh, I doubt that. Bear's gravity will probably pull it in long before it comes close enough to be any sort of threat. One of the benefits of having a gas giant for a neighbor . . . sort of a huge vacuum sweeper for comets and rogue asteroids." Henry gives the others a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. We're just going to have a light show for another week or so."

The group laughs, albeit nervously, and shuffles their feet in the snow. "Well, have fun," Lee says, and ruffles Marie's hair as he walks past. "Don't stay out too long, or you'll catch cold." The little girl favors him with the salute that she's seen her guardians and other former crewmen give him on occasion. Lee dutifully responds in kind; even after nearly four Earth years on Coyote, he's still regarded as captain by most people. He supposes he should be honored, although he prefers to think of himself as an elected public official rather than a commanding officer.

He opens the heavy front door, steps into the foyer, takes a minute to remove his parka and hang it next to the other coats and jackets. Warm air rushes across his face as he opens the inside door; someone has stoked a fire in the wood stove, and the meeting hall is nice and toasty. The grange has become the center of Liberty's social life, particularly during the long months of winter. There's probably a dozen or so people hanging out at Lew's Cantina; every so often Lee will spend an evening there himself, but generally he prefers the more placid ambiance of the grange. Chairs have been pushed aside to make room for card tables; there's a couple of bridge games going on, but a few people are also playing chess or backgammon, and some of the younger children are huddled around a Parcheesi board. Dogs lounge on the blackwood floor, showing only slight interest in the mama cat nursing her kittens in a nearby box. A platter of home-fried potato chips and onion dip has been laid out on the side table beneath a watercolor painting of the *Alabama*; a pot of coffee stays warm on the stove in the center of the room, itself fashioned from an old oxygen cell salvaged from one of the habitat modules.

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And there's music. A three-man jug band—the Crab Suckers, a private joke no one else understands—is on the raised platform at the front of the room, where the council usually sits when the monthly town meeting is in session. With the exception of Ted LeMare's antique Hammond harmonica, brought with him from Earth, their instruments were hand-made by Paul Dwyer, the bassist, and their repertoire mainly consists of twentieth century blues and country standards. But they've been working out some original material lately; as Lee walks in, Barry Dreyfus, Jack's boy, is singing:

"Catwhale, stay away from me.
Catwhale, stay away from me.
Just lost in your river, can't you see?
Catwhale, stay away from me. . . ."

Not quite up the standards of Barry's idol Robert Johnson, but for homespun music it isn't bad. Lee helps himself to a mug of black coffee, and reflects upon the circumstances that inspired this song. Barry was one of the members of the ill-fated Montero Expedition, the group of teenagers that attempted to sail down the Great Equatorial last summer. Considering the fact that one of his friends was killed when a catwhale attacked their canoes, the lyrics are strangely light-hearted; perhaps black humor is Barry's way of dealing with David Levin's death.

"Catwhale, don't eat me.
Catwhale, don't eat me.
There's a lot of other fish you can have for free.
Mr. Catwhale, don't eat me . . . puh-lease!"

Morbid, yes, yet then Lee notices Wendy Gunther sitting nearby. Her legs crossed, her left toe tapping the floor beneath her long catskin skirt, as she bounces baby Susan on her knee. Wendy's another member of the expedition; the last line of Barry's song refers to her near-death experience, but if she thinks it's in bad taste, there's no indication. Susan smiles in delight, babbles something that may be a compliment.

We've raised a tough generation, Lee thinks. *Almost four Earth years, and the kids are hard as nails.*

He can't decide whether he likes that notion or not. Wendy's just turned eighteen, yet not only is she now a mother, but in the last election she managed to get herself voted onto the Town Council, replacing Sissy Levin when she unexpectedly resigned. Wendy ran for office on the platform that Liberty's younger generation needed a voice in the colony government, and since then she's carried out her responsibilities well. Lee can't complain about her performance, yet whenever he sees her, he feels a twinge of long-suppressed guilt. Her father . . .

Enough. There's another reason he's ventured out into the cold Gabriel night. Taking his coffee mug with him, he crosses the hall, briefly nodding or waving to everyone whose eye he meets, until he reaches a door off to one side of the room.

A narrow corridor takes him past the council meeting room, the armory, and the records room. His office door's shut, but there's light under the crack; he hears Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata" from within. He quietly opens the door, steps inside. Dana Monroe is seated at his blackwood desk, studying the screen of his comp; she doesn't look up as he comes up behind her, but smiles as he leans over to give her a kiss on the cheek. "Wondering when you'd get here," she murmurs. "What took you so long?"

"My turn to wash up after dinner, remember?" Lee finds the spare chair,

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pulls it over next to the desk. "That stew you made was pretty good. What'd you put in it?"

"My secret ingredient." She notices the annoyed expression on his face. "Okay, it's what I didn't put in. You told me you don't like garlic, so I left it out this time. Better?"

"Much. Thank you." Dana had been a better Chief Engineer than she was a cook; when she moved in with him last summer, one of the things she had to learn was that her new mate was surprisingly temperamental about what he ate. Otherwise, they have an easy relationship; although Lee has officiated at nearly a dozen civil ceremonies and Dana's helped Dr. Okada deliver four babies, neither of them was in any rush to get married and start a family. Let someone else be fruitful and multiply; their job is managing the colony. "So what's the forecast?"

"Hmm . . . not good." There's a close-up image of the storm on the screen; the time-stamp shows that it was captured by *Alabama*'s cameras as it passed over Coyote's eastern hemisphere an hour and a half ago. She taps the keypad, and now there's a more distant view: a dense swirl of white clouds, shrouding the Equatorial River about five hundred miles east of the Meridian Sea. "Looks like it's picking up moisture off the river," she murmurs. "Still a long way off, but it's growing. Unless something changes in the next day or two it's coming our way."

Lee nods. For the most part, the *Alabama* colonists made the right decision by establishing a settlement close to the equator. Winter on New Florida isn't as brutal as it is in the northern and southernmost latitudes, and they have the advantage of longer growing seasons, from early spring through late autumn. Nonetheless, Coyote's global climate is cooler than Earth's, and Bear's tidal pull frequently plays havoc with wind patterns. Their first winter was relatively mild; it only figures that the colony would eventually have to deal with a major snowstorm.

"There's still a couple of large mountains in the way," Dana says. She points to the major range that straddles Great Dakota, the continent west of New Florida. "Probably won't stop it, but they may blunt the worst of it."

"So we can hope," Lee says. "At least we've got some advance warning. If we can. . . ."

The comp chimes just then, as a small window opens in the center of the screen:

03.12.2304 / 1512 GMT
SAT TRANSMISSION / ALABAMA / PRIORITY 1A
CODE 1893: PROTOCOL ETW-1B
CLASSIFIED / COMMANDING OFFICER'S EYES ONLY
AUTHENTICATION: PASSWORD _____

"What the. . . ?" Dana's eyes narrow. "That's from the ship." She looks over her shoulder at Lee. "And what's this protocol? I don't remember anything like that."

A chill sensation runs down Lee's back. It's been so long since he programmed the subroutine into the *Alabama* AI, he's nearly forgotten it existed. Now it's suddenly become active. But why. . . ?

Then he remembers the comet. Gabriel's Trumpet, as Jack Dreyfus called it just a few minutes ago.

"Robert? What's going on?" Dana searches his face. "Do you want me to leave?" she adds, her voice low as she starts to rise.

"No . . . no, stay with me, Chief," he says quietly. "You ought to know about this . . . but let's keep it between us. At least right now, okay?"

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"Sure. Okay." Dana settles back into her seat. She knows this is serious, not only from the tone of his voice, but also because this is first the time he's addressed her as chief in a long time. They may be partners now, but once again he's the captain of the *Alabama* and she's one of his senior officers. Old habits die hard.

Lee turns the comp toward him, picks up the keyboard, types in the password: *helix*. A few moments pass while the uplink is established, then the window disappears and a new image appears on the screen. Now they're peering into the heart of the comet, as seen by *Alabama*'s onboard navigational telescope. The shape is hazy and ill-defined, yet it's obviously not a natural object: a long, cylindrical form, with a white-hot flare erupting from its aft end.

"That's a starship." Dana's voice is nearly a whisper.

"Uh-huh. I know." Lee hesitates. "Go find the council members. Don't tell them what you saw, just get 'em here. We've got a situation."

Zamael / 2021

Carlos Montero expected to find a crowd at Lew's Cantina, and he was right; it's Zamday night, the middle of the three-day weekend, and Lew Geary's place is the best (and only) watering hole in Liberty. He hasn't come here to drink, though, as much as he's tempted to do so; he's had a long day at the boat house, finishing the longboats he and his crew have been building for the last few months. There's one quick errand that needs to be done before he goes home to Wendy and Susan, but the moment he spots Chris Levin, he knows it's not going to work out that way.

Not that he isn't welcome at the cantina. For the first few weeks after he returned from his solo journey down the Great Equatorial, he was shunned by quite a few people in town. Although most realized that David's death was accidental, nonetheless they blamed him for persuading David and the others to steal a couple of canoes and run away from Liberty. Before they left, they'd pilfered supplies from all over the colony, including irreplaceable items like riffles and a satphone. Almost everything they had stolen was eventually returned, yet Carlos soon discovered restoring someone's flashlight was much easier than restoring their trust. Yet over the course of the last four months—a solid year, by Gregorian reckoning—he had gone out of his way to make amends with all the people that he'd offended or wronged, until by the end of c.y. 2 he was back in good graces with everyone.

Nearly everyone. . . .

Chris is seated on a stool at the far end of the blackwood bar, a mug of sourgrass ale parked in front of him. Carlos ignores his sullen gaze as he moves through the packed room, greeting friends he encounters along the way. Bernie and Vonda Cayle are sitting by the fireplace; they're old friends of his late mother and father, and never gave up on him even in his darkest hour, yet although Bernie tries to wave him over for a drink, Chris shakes his head. He made a promise to Wendy before he left home this morning, and he doesn't want beer on his breath when she comes back from the grange.

There's an amused expression on Lew's face as Carlos approaches the bar. "Ah, so. Mr. Montero, the famous explorer," he says, looking up from the ceramic mug he's washing. "What brings you here this evening? Your usual?"

"If you've got it, please." Carlos hasn't taken off his parka; he props his el-

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bows on the bar and nods politely to Jean Swenson and Ellery Balis standing nearby. Jean gives him a smile, but Ellery scowls and looks away. Little wonder; as the colony's quartermaster, Ellery is responsible for the safekeeping of all the firearms, and he's still irritated at Carlos for having stolen the key to the armory. Carlos tried to make up for the theft by stocking the armory with the bows he learned to make while fending for himself on the river; they've helped the blue-shirts fend off the creek cats and swampers without wasting any more rifle bullets, but Carlos knows Mr. Balis is one of those who will never completely forgive nor forget.

Lew walks to the door behind the bar, pushes aside the curtain. "Carrie! A jug of your best for Carlos!" He glances back at him. "One'll do it, or you want more?" Carlos shakes his head and Lew holds up a finger to his wife before returning to the bar. "Sure you don't want anything else? It's a cold night, son. . . ."

"I'm sure. Thanks anyway." Carlos digs into the pocket of his parka, pulls out a dollar. He drops the wooden coin on the bar, but Lew shakes his head and quietly slides it back across the counter to him. No words are spoken between them; Carlos nods gratefully as he picks up the dollar, but the gesture hasn't gone unnoticed.

"Yeah, hey . . . heroes drink for free, don't they?"

Chris's voice is loud enough to carry across the room. From the corner of his eye, Carlos sees people glancing up from their conversations. Everyone knows there's bad blood between them. Not only that, but ever since the Town Council formally introduced the currency system a couple of months ago, no one has managed to cadge a drink from Lew . . . or at least not without scrubbing the kitchen, repairing the roof, or cleaning out the goat pen out back.

"It's not what you think," Lew says quietly. "Let it go."

"Okay, sure. None of my business." Chris raises his hands in mock apology. He picks up his mug, looks at Carlos. "Hey, c'mon over and have a drink."

"No thanks." Carlos gives him a wary smile. "Just dropping by for a minute."

"A minute? Just for a minute?" Chris's face expresses bafflement. "You can't do better than that? Come on, we're ol' fishing buddies. . . ."

The last thing Carlos wants to do to have a drink with Chris, no matter how many times they used to pull redfish out of Sand Creek. Not that he hasn't already tried to patch things up with him. Twice before, they've sat together at this same bar, two young men barely eighteen, putting away one mug of sourgrass ale after another. Each time, it was a disaster; the first occasion, Chris got pissed off and tried to throw a punch at Carlos before Lew grabbed him and threw him out the door; the second time, Chris became a maudlin drunk, inconsolably sobbing about his lost brother before attacking Carlos again, managing to put a mouse under his eye before a blue-shirt hauled him away to the stockade for the night. Lew barred Chris from the cantina after that, and let him back in only after he promised never again to pick a fight in his establishment.

Perhaps this isn't a prelude to another incident, yet there's no warmth in Chris's invitation. His hostility toward Carlos goes beyond his brother's death. His mother suffered a severe breakdown a few weeks after Chris returned to the colony; first she'd lost her husband, then her younger son; she eventually recovered, but she's battled depression ever since, often staying in their house for weeks at a time. Then Chris proposed to Wendy shortly before Susan was born, and she turned him down. Carlos moved in with her

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not long after he returned, and although she hasn't agreed to marry him either, if only because she's still uncertain of their relationship—indeed, their home is just a two-room addition their friends built onto Kuniko Okada's house—Chris has never gotten over that either.

Once again, Carlos observes how much Chris has changed. His face has become swollen from drinking; his blond hair hangs lank around his face, and there's a suggestion of a beer gut at his midriff. He knows that Chris has fallen to holding down odd jobs around Liberty, keeping them only until he screws up again and gets shunted off to a new duty generously supplied by another foreman. At age eighteen, Chris is well on his way to becoming the town drunk.

"Sorry, man." Carlos tries to keep things as cordial as possible. "Got something else going on. Maybe another time." He turns away, hoping Chris will take the hint, yet he can still hear him muttering about how his oldest friend doesn't want to be seen with him anymore. Which isn't far from the truth. . . .

Hearing the front door open, Carlos looks around, sees Dana Monroe come in. Pulling back the hood of her catskin cape, she glances around the room as if searching for someone. Spotting Bernie and Vonda Cayle, she begins to ease through the crowd. Odd to see her here; she almost never visits the cantina.

Carrie Geary picks that moment to emerge from the back room. "Here you go," she says, holding up a large brown jug. "From our private stock. Want me to put it on the tab?"

"Already got it covered." Her husband takes the jug from her, starts to pass it to Carlos. "Tell Wendy . . ."

"Oh, yeah, hey! Check this out!" Chris points to the jug. "Son-of-a-bitch won't drink with an ol' buddy, but he can always carry home some of their private stock!" A few more people pay attention now; colony law clearly states that all liquor produced at Lew's Cantina must be consumed on the premises. "Guess there's a double . . . double-standard for famous explorers, right?"

Carlos closes his eyes, embarrassed not so much for himself as for Chris. Yet if Lew's angered by the accusation, he hides it well. "Uh-huh, you're right. Caught us in the act, that you did." He steps closer to Chris. "Tell you what," he murmurs, his tone conspiratorial. "If you promise to drop it, I'll let you try some. On the house."

Chris stares greedily at the jug, not noticing that some of the patrons are chuckling behind his back. "Umm . . . all right, sure. Bring it on."

Lew picks up Chris's half-empty mug. He uncorks the jug, but briefly turns his back to him as he pours. "Here y'go," he says, handing the mug back to Chris. "Our best stuff."

"Thanks, Lew. You're a gentleman." Chris gives Carlos a smug wink as he raise his drink. "To your wife," he adds. "A real fine lady."

Silence falls across the room. There's no mistaking what he means by that remark. Carlos says nothing as he watches Chris takes a deep slug. A moment passes, then Chris's face screws up in disgust. For a second, it seems as if he's going to spit it out.

"Oh, no you don't!" Carrie snaps. "Puke in my place and you're mopping the floor!"

"She's right!" Lew yells. "You drink it, you swallow it! Rules of the house!"

Everyone's cracking up, but Carlos doesn't laugh. He catches a glimpse of the anger and humiliation in Chris's eyes as he lurches from his stool and quickly staggers across the room, his hand clasped over his mouth. He near-

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ly collides with Dana as he stumbles through the front door; she stares after him, then reaches over to escort Vonda through the uproar.

"Here you go," Lew says, slapping the cork back in the jug before he hands it across the bar to Carlos. "Two quarts of fresh goat's milk. Tell Wendy there's plenty more where that came from . . . unless Chris wants another round, of course."

You didn't have to do that, Carlos thinks, yet he doesn't say this aloud. Ever since Wendy stopped breast-feeding, the Gearys have provided Susan with pasteurized milk from their goats. It's clear that Lew doesn't care much for Chris, though, and there's no worse contempt than that of a bartender for a drunkard.

"Thanks, I'll do that." Carlos tucks the jug beneath his arm, turns toward the door. With any luck, Chris will be so sick that he won't be able to start any trouble outside.

He's halfway across the room, though, when Dana stops him. "Are you going home?" she asks softly, and shakes her head when he nods. "No. Follow me back to the grange and pick up Sue. Wendy needs you to babysit for awhile."

After this, taking care of their daughter would be a pleasure. Nonetheless, Carlos is surprised by the request. "Why, what's going on?"

Dana glances over her shoulder, making sure they're not being overheard. "Emergency council meeting. Everyone's being called in." Before he can ask, she shakes her head again. "Can't tell you more than that. Just come with me."

Outside the cantina, the wind has picked up again. Thin clouds scud across the sky, shrouding the comet. Carlos joins the two older women for the short walk back to the center of town, their boots crunching softly against the packed snow. They've barely gone a few steps, though, when he hears someone behind them.

He turns to see Chris slumped against the cantina. He'd left his parka behind; shivering in the cold, he holds his arms together as he leans unsteadily against the log wall. There's a small puddle of vomit at his feet, already freezing solid.

"Chris . . ." Carlos hesitates; behind him, Dana and Vonda have stopped. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to . . ."

"Get lost," Chris mutters, not looking up at him.

"Do you want me to get your coat? I can go back in, get it. . . ."

"Just go away." Chris's voice is as chill as the wind; masked by shadows, his face is unreadable. "Lemme alone."

Carlos turns back to Dana and Vonda. Nothing more is said as they continue walking toward town, but after a while Vonda slips her hand through his elbow. There's little comfort she can give him, though, for now he knows the truth.

He's lost his oldest friend. Chris is now his enemy.

Zamael / 2052

"No question about it . . . that's the plume of a fusion engine." Henry Johnson examines the image on the council room's wall screen. "Given the size of the ship, I'd say it's firing at about one gee, sufficient to decelerate from relativistic velocity."

"And how. . . ?" Sharon Ullman involuntarily yawns. "'Cuse me . . . how far away do you say it is?"

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Lee consults his pad. "According to *Alabama,* its current position is just within the orbit of Snake, about three hundred thousands miles from us." Before Sharon can ask, he answers the obvious next question. "And, yes, it's on an intercept trajectory with Coyote. It should arrive within the next twenty-seven hours. I think we can safely assume that it'll make orbit at that time."

Seated around the blackwood table, the members of the Town Council glance at one another. Fortunately, it hadn't taken long to gather them for an emergency session; Tom, Paul, Wendy, and Henry were already at the grange, and Dana found Vonda at the cantina. Only Sharon had to be woken out of bed; she still looks half-asleep, but Dana brought in a pot of coffee before she left the room, shutting the door behind her. She's not a council member, so she's not privy to their discussions.

"It doesn't give us much time," Lee continues, "but at least we've got some advance warning. If we work quickly, we can figure out an appropriate course of . . ."

"Pardon me." Like a shy student interrupting her teacher, Wendy raises her hand; Lee nods in her direction. "I'm sorry, but there's just one thing I don't . . . what I mean is . . . how did the AI figure out this was a ship and know to contact us?"

"Good question." Tom Shapiro looks from her to Lee. "I don't remember anything like an early warning system being written into the AI." Across the table, Sharon nods in agreement. As the *Alabama*'s former senior navigator, she's familiar with the AI's major subroutines, particularly those controlling the navigation telescope. Nothing like this was programmed into the AI before the *Alabama* left Earth.

Lee drums his fingers on the table. He knew this question would eventually be raised: better now than later. "I've got something to show you," he says at last. "Nobody here has seen it before now, so I'm going to have to ask that it not leave this room. . . . or at least not until we're ready to divulge it to the rest of the colony. Understood?"

Reluctant murmurs of assent. Lee picks up an *Alabama* operations manual he's brought over from his office, opens it. From the back pocket of the three-ring binder, he produces two sheets of paper: brittle and yellow with age, with ragged tears down one side. Carefully unfolding them to reveal faded handscript, he hands them across the table to Tom.

"You know what happened to Les Gillis, of course," Lee says. "Awakened from biostasis three months after we left Earth, spent the next thirty-two years alone aboard the ship. Wrote fantasy stories to pass the time. . . ."

"*The Chronicles of Prince Rupurt.*" Wendy nods. "I've read it twice."

"Yes, well . . ." He takes a deep breath. "Before Les did that, he wrote something else . . . sort of an unofficial log entry, in the first ledger book he used for his stories. The time he spent aboard the *Alabama* wasn't completely uneventful. Not too long after he woke up . . ."

"Oh, my God." Tom stares at the pages he's been reading. "He spotted another ship."

"He saw a light . . . a moving star, as he describes it . . . from the wardroom window. He interpreted it as another starship passing the *Alabama,* heading in the opposite direction. He attempted to make contact but failed, and then the ship vanished. Never saw it again." Lee looks at Wendy. "I've read the Prince Rupurt stories, too. I think that's what gave him the idea. Whether it really was another ship, though, I have my doubts. At any rate, he noted the sighting in his ledger, just before he began work on his book."

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"But that's not in . . ." Wendy says, then Tom hands her the pages and she notices their tattered edges. "You tore these out of the ledger?"

"Robert . . . why?" Tom looks bewildered. "Didn't you trust us?"

"Trust wasn't the issue, believe me." Lee clasps his hands together, gazes down at them. "Look, we'd come out of being in biostasis for two hundred and thirty years, with a hundred and three people aboard, half of whom weren't trained for the mission, not to mention five URS soldiers who were on the verge of inciting mutiny. Our food and water reserves were low, and we didn't know for certain whether Coyote was habitable. The last thing people needed to worry about was whether someone else was out there. I wanted everyone to stay focused upon survival, not watching the skies to see if aliens were about to land.

"I was the first person to read Gillis's ledgers. When I saw this, I ripped out the pages and hid them. But just to be on the safe side, shortly before I left *Alabama* I programmed the AI to track any incoming objects through the telescope and alert me if it spotted anything that might resemble an approaching ship." Lee opens his hands, shrugs. "And that's what it did . . . and so now you know. It wasn't my intent to deceive anyone here. I just didn't believe it was critical information."

All through this, he carefully avoids looking at Wendy. There's more to the matter than this. Gillis left behind yet another note, one he destroyed long ago, lest she learn the truth about her father.

"Not critical information?" Vonda regards him with disbelief. "Captain, I can't believe you'd . . ."

"Never mind that now," Paul says, cutting her off. "What's done is done. What matters is where this leaves us. Assuming that it's an alien ship . . ."

"I wouldn't assume that," Henry says. "In fact, I'd call it unlikely."

Paul gives him a curious look. "Sorry, I'm not following you."

"What I mean is, we're jumping to the most far-fetched conclusion without considering the facts." Henry points to the wallscreen. "Look, we already know this thing is coming straight here. That can't be a coincidence. Why would aliens pick this one particular world . . . a moon of an ordinary gas giant orbiting an ordinary star . . . for a visit?"

"Because they know we're here." Paul raises an eyebrow as if this is obvious fact.

Henry shakes his head. "There's no reason to believe that Coyote is inhabited. We haven't transmitted any radio signals since we first got here, and then only briefly . . . a message that, even if intercepted, could be coming from anywhere in space. *Alabama* can't be detected from interstellar distances, and even if you were in low orbit above Coyote, you couldn't tell there was someone down here. You've seen the orbital photos . . . Liberty is virtually invisible."

"Maybe they're searching for a place to establish a colony themselves," Sharon says.

"Perhaps . . . but what are the odds of two different races wanting to settle the same planet at the same time? The galaxy is vast. . . ."

"And habitable planets are rare," Tom says. "That was established a long time ago."

"Established by whom? Us? We'd barely searched one small corner of space for only a couple of dozen years before we found 47 Uma. That doesn't mean . . ."

"Gentlemen," Lee interjects, "this is an interesting debate, but it's getting

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us nowhere. However, Henry's got a point. The idea that this ship may be extraterrestrial is an unlikely explanation. If we accept that, then it leaves us with only one other possibility . . . it's coming from Earth."

Everyone shuffles in their seats. No one speaks, but Lee notices that their eyes reflexively shift to the flag that hangs against one wall. Red and white stripes, with a single white star against a blue field: the symbol of the United Republic of America. Presented to him by the mission launch supervisor at Merritt Island just before he left Earth, Lee has never permitted it to be raised above town; he put it in the council room instead, as a silent reminder of the tyranny they left behind.

"If that's the case," Vonda says quietly, "perhaps we should attempt to contact it. Let them know we're here, where we are."

"And if it was launched by the Republic?" Tom asks. "Do you really want URS soldiers coming down on us?"

"Oh, come on. We left Earth . . . what, almost two hundred and thirty-four years ago? I have a hard time believing the Republic lasted that long."

"Doesn't matter whether it's still around or not," Tom says. "If it survived long enough to build another ship . . . a twin to the *Alabama* . . . then it could have been launched only three years after we took off. Which means it'd be arriving just about now."

"Then why use a fusion engine to decelerate?" Henry asks. "*Alabama* conserved fuel by using its magsail to brake itself. Why wouldn't a sister ship do the same?" He holds up a hand before Tom can go on. "Besides, remember how long it took to build the *Alabama*? And how much? Ten years and a hundred billion, and the government wrecked the economy to do that. So how could they construct another ship just like it in such a short period of time?"

"I don't know the answers." Tom's beginning to look annoyed. "All I know is, I'd rather play possum until we know more."

Vonda opens her mouth to object, but Lee waves her off. "I tend to agree with Tom. We shouldn't expose ourselves until we . . ."

A soft knock against the door interrupts him. Lee looks around. "Come in."

The door opens; Dana steps in. "Sorry to intrude, but . . ." She hesitates. "*Alabama*'s just received a radio transmission . . . and it's in English."

Everyone is on their feet in an instant. Lee barely manages to beat everyone else out of the meeting room. He leads them into his adjacent office, where they crowd into every available corner. Taking his seat at his desk, he waits until Dana sits down in front of the comp, then motions for Paul to close the door behind them.

"Okay," he says, "show us what you've got."

"Well, first, there's this." Dana leans across him to pick up the keyboard. "About five minutes ago, *Alabama* detected a change in the comet's . . . I mean, the ship's . . . condition."

The screen changes. Now the exhaust plume has vanished, leaving behind only a bright orange spot against the black background of space. "They shut down the main engine," Sharon says; she's standing behind Lee, peering over his shoulder. "Probably don't need it anymore, and they'd have to do so in order to transmit a radio signal."

"Makes sense," Lee says. In the back of his mind, he realizes that anyone outside the grange will have noticed that the comet has suddenly disappeared. "Go on, Dana."

"I was still trying to figure out what happened when we received this. . . ." She taps a command into the keypad. A tinny sound comes from the speak-

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er; static courses through it until Dana cuts in digital filters and raises the volume. Now, in sharp and sudden clarity, a voice:

". . . if you are able . . . repeat, to URSS *Alabama*, this is WHSS *Glorious Destiny*. Please respond if you are able . . . repeat, to URSS *Alabama,* this is WHSS *Glorious Destiny*. Please respond if you are able . . . repeat, to URSS *Alabama* . . ."

Over and over again, like a 'bot reiterating the same prerecorded alert. Indeed, the voice has a certain artificial quality. "That's all I've received so far," Dana says, looking over her shoulder at the others. "For what it's worth, they're signaling *Alabama,* not us."

"Guess that settles the argument," Henry says quietly. "It's from home." Then he looks at the others. "Okay, so now what do we do?"

"We play possum." Lee glances at Tom; his former first officer gives him a slight nod. "We've found them before they found us. For the time being, we're going to keep it that way. Total radio silence until we learn more about them."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Sharon asks.

"What you always do when new neighbors move in." Lee smiles. "Haul out the welcome wagon."

Liberty: Orifiel, Gabriel 17 / 0834

Cold oxygen fumes drift upward from the *Plymouth*'s vents, made ghostly by the wan morning sun. For nearly four Earth years, one of *Alabama*'s two shuttles has always been kept in flightworthy condition, a task made difficult by the fact that several Coyote months often went by before either of them flew. Despite Dana's efforts to protect the craft from the weather, some of the spaceplanes' more delicate components are wearing out, and lately it's become necessary for them to share parts. The engineering team borrowed hardware from the *Mayflower* and worked overtime to install them aboard her sister ship, while the indigenous-fuel converters groaned constantly, sucking in air and filling the wing tanks with supercooled hydrogen for the nuclear engines.

Seated in *Plymouth*'s narrow cockpit, running down the preflight checklist, Lee once again reflects upon just how ill-prepared *Alabama* was for colonizing another world. The United Republic of America had splurged a hundred billion dollars to build a monument to itself, while giving little thought to the fact that the men, women, and children it sent out into interstellar space would have to build a self-sustaining colony. Two state-of-the-art SSTO shuttles with few spare parts to keep them operational for more than a few years. A large supply of pharmaceuticals, but no way to manufacture more once they ran low. All the tools needed to build shelters, and a ridiculously inadequate means of generating electrical power. There were Federal Space Agency scientists working on the Starflight Project who'd considered such things, of course, but most of them were branded as dissident intellectuals and shipped off to re-education camps, while Liberty Party politicians harrumphed about the "American frontier spirit." He would have loved to have seen some of them here, chopping wood and planting crops; most of them probably wouldn't have survived the first winter.

No. Enough of that. Gazing through the cockpit window, Lee sees a small crowd gathered at the landing pad, watching the shuttle as it's prepped for liftoff. No official announcement had yet been made, but rumors are doubtless spreading through town. Sooner or later, the council will have to tell the

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townspeople what they should know. It should have been done earlier, but there simply hasn't been enough time.

"Skipper?" Jud Tinsley enters the cockpit. "We've got five suits aboard, and Ellery says there's five more aboard *Mayflower*. If you want more, he can haul 'em out of storage, but he can't guarantee what shape they'll be in."

"Five will do," Lee says. "Three for you, me, and Dana, and two for our passengers." Jud gives him a curious look as he rests his arms against the back of the pilot's seat. "I know we can take more, but I want to keep the team as small as possible. Less chance of . . . well, the fewer people directly involved, the better. Understood?"

"Yeah, okay . . . I mean, yes sir." Like his other former officers, Jud has subconsciously slipped back into his old mindset: no longer treating Lee like a mayor, but as his commanding officer. "So who else do you want aboard?"

Lee's been thinking about this. He himself will be mission commander; Jud's the pilot, and Dana's the flight engineer. But they'll need two specialists. "Henry Johnson's got a good handle on this. I've already spoken with him, and he's willing to go. And we should take someone else from the council, too . . . another civilian, just to even things out. I was thinking about Vonda. . . ."

"I've already asked her, and she refused." Jud grins as Lee stares at him in surprise. "She says she throws up every time she rides in one of these things."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." The first time Vonda Cayle got spacesick, it was aboard the *Mayflower*—then christened the URSS *George Wallace*—when it lifted off from Merritt Island on its way up to the *Alabama*; the second time was when she was aboard this same craft, formerly the *Jesse Helms*, when it brought the colonists down to New Florida. These two incidents may have been separated by a quarter of a millennium and forty-six light years, yet the last thing Lee wants now is to have an ill passenger aboard. "So who else do we have? We're leaving Tom behind to . . ."

"We've got a volunteer." There's a wry expression on Jud's face. "But you may not want her."

"Oh, no . . . she's not here, is she?"

"Out back, waiting to see you." Jud can barely conceal his grin. "I tried to talk her out of it, but she's . . ."

"Right." Annoyed, Lee taps an instruction into the keypad, stopping the diagnostic test he's been running, before he rises from the right-hand seat. "And, of course, you let her come aboard, even though I told you not to let anyone . . ."

"What could I say?" Jud steps aside as Lee brushes past him. "She's a council member. If she wants to come aboard . . ."

"Carry on," Lee mutters as he ducks his head to leave the cockpit.

Wendy's in the passenger compartment, sitting on the arm of one of the acceleration couches, pad in her left hand. She nervously rises, but before she can speak, Lee raises a hand. "You've already asked once, and I've given you my answer. Give me one good reason why I should change my mind. And don't say it's because you're on the council . . . there are six other members who have more seniority than you do."

"I know. That's the very reason why I should go."

Lee crosses his arms. "All right. I'm listening."

"This is a historic event, right? The second ship to arrive from Earth, possibly carrying colonists of its own. . . ."

"Or a squad of armed soldiers."

She looks at him askance. "C'mon, you can't seriously believe that. It didn't identify itself as belonging to the Republic, only as the WHSS *Glorious Des-*

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tiny . . . whatever WHSS means." She shakes her head. "In any case, this is something that will take its place in the colony's official history."

"What official history?"

"The one I've been writing." She holds up her pad. "Ever since First Landing Day, I've been keeping a journal. Kuniko got me started on it, and I've been at it ever since. Everything's here . . ."

"Tom Shapiro's the town secretary. He's in charge of maintaining the colony log."

"But since you're leaving him behind to take charge of the council in your absence, he won't be able to witness this mission, will he? Besides, have you actually read Tom's log? It's pretty dry . . . nothing but statistics. My journal is much better than that. And do I need to remind you that you yourself encouraged me to do this?"

"I did indeed, but not as an official record." Lee lets out his breath. "Let me get this straight. You're saying that the reason why you should go is that you'd serve as the . . . well, maybe not as secretary, but as a historian. You'd deliver an unbiased account of whatever happens up there. . . ."

"Not necessarily unbiased, but at least truthful."

"Don't play semantics with me. When I say unbiased, I mean it." She turns red, looks down at the deck. "And you'd enter your account in the log, signing your name to it as a member of the Town Council." She nods. "That's a good reason, I'll grant you that . . . but it still sounds like an excuse you've worked up. Now be honest . . . why should I take along a young mother on a potentially hazardous mission?"

"Because I want to go!" When she looks up at him again, Lee's surprised to see tears at the corners of her eyes. "Mr. Mayor . . . Captain . . . I can't explain why, but . . . but this is something I've just got to do. My father rescued me from a youth hostel when he got me signed aboard the *Alabama* as a colonist. If he hadn't, I probably would have spent the rest of my life as a ward of the Republic. Probably washing clothes in a D.I. internment camp, if I was lucky. And then, after all that, almost as soon as we got here, he . . ."

Wendy stops, rubs her eyes. *He died,* she meant to say, but she doesn't know the half of it. Lee looks away, not wanting to meet her gaze. As she just said, there's the unbiased account of what happened, and then there's the truth. . . .

"Look," she continues, "this is the first contact we've had with Earth since we left. I've got to know for myself what happened back there. I didn't have many friends in the hostel, but I did leave a few behind. I just want to find out. . . ."

"Okay, okay." Lee holds up a hand. "Carlos can take care of Susan while you're away, right?" She snuffles back tears, gives him a weak nod. "And you'll pay attention to everything that occurs, and write reports for the council and . . . um, your official history?" She nods again, and he sighs. "All right. Against my better judgment, you're on the team. Go see Ellery about . . ."

He doesn't get a chance to finish before she throws her arms around him. "Thank you," she whispers. "Thank you so much. . . ."

"All right. Okay." Grateful there's no one here to witness this, Lee gently pries the girl off him, daubs the tears from her face. "Now hurry up . . . we're lifting off in an hour. You've got just enough time to say goodbye to Susan and Carlos."

"Yes, sir." She's already heading for the ramp. "Be back soon as I can." She pauses at the open hatch, looks back at him. "And Captain. . . ? Thanks for believing in me."

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Lee forces a smile, gives her a short wave that she accepts with a beautiful smile before she rushes down the gangway. The moment she's gone, though, he closes his eyes, leans heavily against the hatchway, and prays that he hasn't made a mistake.

Orifiel / 0940

The muted rumble of engines being revved up, then a crackling roar that ripples across the frozen marsh as *Plymouth* slowly ascends upon its VTOL jets. Carlos quickly reaches down to cup his hands over Susan's ears; the little girl quails back against him, yet she doesn't seem frightened so much as astonished. Her eyes are huge as she watches the spacecraft rise; a blast of hot air rushes across them, an instant of summer on a cold winter morning.

"Wave bye-bye to Mama." Carlos picks up Sue's arm, raises it above her head. "Go on, Sue . . . wave bye-bye." Susan gazes up at him solemnly, not quite comprehending what he's just said even though she watched Mama walk up *Plymouth's* gangway just a few minutes ago, then she silently waves her tiny hand just as she's been taught. Then she loses her balance and falls down on her rump.

Carlos scoops her up, straddles her across his shoulders. Susan squeals in delight and immediately loses interest in the *Plymouth*. By now the shuttle has reached cruise altitude; its blunt nose tilts upward, then its scramjets kick in, and the gull-winged spacecraft soars upward into the slate-grey sky. Within a few seconds, it disappears through the low clouds, leaving behind only a pair of smoky contrails. A minute later, there's a loud boom from far above as the craft goes supersonic.

The crowd watching the launch begins to dissipate, townspeople tucking their gloved hands in the pockets of their parkas as they turn away, talking quietly to one another. Even though no official announcement has been made by the council, everyone already knows about the Earth ship. Until they hear back from *Plymouth,* there's little to be done; Carlos supposes he could put Susan in Kuniko's care and go down to the boat house to get some work done. The thirty-four-foot faux-birch longboats he and several others have been building for the past several months are practically finished; they only need to have their masts fitted with rigging.

Besides, it'll help take his mind off Wendy. He tried to talk her out of going, insisting that this was nothing that Captain Lee and the others couldn't handle on their own, but she was adamant about going with them. When the captain turned her down the first time, Carlos was secretly relieved, but she went back again, and that time . . . well, he should have figured that she'd eventually win. When it comes to arguments, he's already learned that Wendy seldom loses.

"C'mon, little creek-cat," he says. "Piggy-back ride to Aunt Kuni's house!" Susan babbles happily in baby-speak as she grasps the hood of his parka, and he's just turned to walk back toward town when he hears a voice behind him.

"Surprised you didn't go up yourself," Chris says. "Thought a hero like you wouldn't pass up the chance for more glory."

Carlos looks around, sees Chris heading toward him. He looks better than he did last night, but not much; there are dark circles beneath his eyes, and Carlos has little doubt he's suffering from a wicked hangover. Just behind

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him, his mother trudges through the snow; her parka hood is turned up. Once again Ms. Levin throws him an icy glare before she looks away. Sissy Levin has barely spoken to him since he returned from his journey down the Great Equatorial River, but what little she's said has always been brutal.

"No one asked me to go." Carlos keeps walking, his hands wrapped around Susan's ankles. "Besides, this is Wendy's business. She doesn't need me."

"Hey, how 'bout that . . . something you and I can finally agree on." Chris's smile is bitter, without humor. "How long did it take you to figure that out?"

This is just as pointless now as it was last night; Carlos knows he should just let it go. It's been nearly a year and a half, by Gregorian reckoning, since they went down the river together, yet Coyote's long seasons collapse time, making everything seem shorter. They've come a long way since they left Earth, and not just in terms of distance; they boarded the *Alabama* as kids, and now they're both young men who've suffered the loss of parents and, in Chris's case, a brother. Chris loathes him, yet Carlos still maintains hope that he can reach through his anger to find the boy he once considered his best friend.

"What happened to you, man?" Carlos stops, looks straight at him. "You've changed. There's something . . . I dunno, but it's ugly, and I wish you'd get rid of it."

Shock appears on Chris's face. He stares at Carlos in surprise, and Carlos suddenly realizes that this is the first time in many weeks, perhaps a month, that he's spoken to him like this. All through autumn and into winter, Chris has chided him, baited him, tried to pick fights, finally leading Carlos to avoid contact with him altogether. Maybe it was because Wendy was always nearby, often out of sight but never out of mind. But now she's gone, at least temporarily, and it feels as if a shackle has been loosened.

"I . . . I haven't changed," Chris protests. "You're the one who's . . ."

"Yes, I have," Carlos says. "I'll admit it . . . I'm not the same guy I was last summer. A lot's happened since then, and none of it's been easy. There's things I did back then that keep me awake at night, and believe me, there's no way I think of myself as a hero. But I keep going, because I've got my kid to take care of . . ."

"His kid, you mean." Ms. Levin has also stopped; from the corner of his eye, Carlos can see her glaring at him. "That's my granddaughter you're holding. I hope you're treating her right."

Carlos suppresses a sigh; they've been through this many times before. When Wendy was still in the early stages of her pregnancy, there was some doubt over who was the father. Although it seemed certain that Carlos was responsible, there was also the fact that Wendy had had a brief affair with Chris. Dr. Okada settled the question through blood tests, but even after she'd certified that Susan was Carlos's child and Chris reluctantly accepted her findings, Sissy Levin remained adamant in her belief that Susan was Chris's offspring. She'd even gone so far as to accuse Kuniko of tampering with the test results and lying to everyone involved, including the Town Council. This occurred during the depths of her breakdown, yet even through her depression has stabilized—at least she's no longer threatening suicide—Sissy continues to quietly insist that Susan is a grandchild who has been unjustly taken away from her.

"Mom, please let me handle this, okay?" Chris gives her a sharp look, and Ms. Levin seems to fold into herself. "Go on home. I'll make lunch for us, all right?"

His mother nods numbly, then turns and starts walking toward town, her

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head bowed. Watching her leave, Carlos feels pity for the once-strong woman who used to make grilled cheese sandwiches for them. "I hope she's doing okay," he says quietly.

"Some days are better than others. This isn't . . ." Then Chris seems to remember that he's supposed to be angry. "What do you expect? If it wasn't for you. . . ."

"How many times do you want me to say I'm sorry?" Carlos feels Susan impatiently squirm against the back of his neck. "Okay . . . I'm sorry. I'm really sorry about what happened to David, and I'm sorry about your father. . . ."

"And last night? After you set me up at the cantina?" Chris's eyes are cold. "Maybe you'll be happy to know that Lew's barred me from his place again. Only beer joint in town, and I can't go there any more."

Maybe it'll do you some good, Carlos thinks, but he doesn't say this. "I didn't set you up, but if you want to think that . . ."

"Yeah, right, you're sorry. Heard it before, means just as much as it did the last time."

"Chris . . ."

"Forget it. What's the point?" Then he glances up at the sky, watching the contrails as they're whisked away by the breeze. "But, y'know . . . I kind of hope that's a Republic ship. It'd sure be sweet to see someone come down here and . . ."

He stops, shakes his head. "Never mind. Go back to . . . whatever." He turns his back to Carlos, begins following his mother. "Take it easy, hero. Don't lose any more sleep."

Carlos waits a few moments to let Chris get ahead of him, then he falls in with the last of the townspeople leaving the landing pad. Susan restlessly kicks at the side of his face; he'll have to change her diaper once they're home. Wendy's been gone for only ten or fifteen minutes, and he misses her already.

He scarcely notices that the wind has begun to rise.

Plymouth: Orifiel, Gabriel 17 / 2612

"Wendy? Time to wake up."

Captain Lee's voice in her headset nudges her from a dreamless sleep. Wendy opens her eyes, glances across the aisle of the passenger compartment. Henry yawns and stretches; Dana's seat is empty, though.

"I'm here," she mumbles. Her mouth tastes like cotton; she reaches beneath her couch for the plastic squeeze bottle of water she'd stashed down there. No response; Henry motions to the wand of his headset, and now she remembers that she has to tap it to activate the comlink. "I'm up, Captain," she says. "Where are we?"

"Last place we were when you sacked out." Dana's voice. She must have gone forward to the cockpit. "But we're no longer alone, just in case you're interested."

Wendy and Henry trade a look, then both of them scramble to unbuckle their seat harnesses. Wendy's first out of her couch; floating upward from her seat, she grabs the ceiling rail, then begins pulling herself hand over hand toward the cockpit. The bulky spacesuit she's wearing hinders her movements, but she manages to squeeze through the narrow hatch ahead of Henry.

The view from the cockpit is spectacular. Three hundred sixty miles below, Coyote stretches out before them as a vast, curving plain, the green and

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tan landscapes of its continents and major islands crisscrossed by the aquamarine veins of river channels and tributaries, the Great Equatorial River cutting through them as a broad blue swath. They're passing over the eastern hemisphere; it's early morning down there, which means it must be close to midnight back in Liberty. Bear would be somewhere behind them.

"Not down there," Lee says quietly. "Look up."

Wendy raises her eyes, and her breath catches in her throat. Through the center window, she sees an elongated shape, off-white and reflecting the sunlight, the apparent size of her forefinger yet steadily growing larger: cylindrical in form, wasp-waisted at its center, slightly wider at one end.

"Twenty nautical miles and closing." In the left seat, Jud Tinsley keeps an eye on the instrument panel. "On course for orbital rendezvous."

"Very good." Lee glances back at Wendy and Henry. "I know it's tight up here, but try to find a place where you're out of the way." Wendy looks around, finds Dana jammed into the narrow space behind the right seat; she moves over a little more to make room for her. Henry tucks himself behind Jud's seat, murmuring an apology when he jostles the pilot. *Plymouth*'s cockpit wasn't designed to hold so many people, but it can't be helped; there are no windows in the back of the shuttle.

Lee waits until everyone is settled, then reaches the com panel and flips a couple of switches. Wendy hears the soft purr of carrier static in her headset. "WHSS *Glorious Destiny,* this is Coyote spacecraft *Plymouth,* do you copy? Over." He waits a moment. "WHSS *Glorious Destiny,* this is *Alabama* shuttle *Plymouth,* formerly URSS *Jessie Helms*. Do you copy? Please acknowledge, over."

Silence. Lee looks back at Dana. "I'm transmitting on the KU frequency band," he says, cupping a hand around his mike, "but I don't think they're picking this up."

"Maybe they're using . . ." she begins.

"URSS *Jessie Helms,* this is WHSS *Glorious Destiny*." The voice they hear is clear, but not the same one they heard before. "We receive you. Do you receive us? Over."

Smiles and relieved laughter, until Captain Lee raises a hand to quiet the others. He unclasps his headset wand. "Affirmative, *Glorious Destiny,* we . . . um, receive you. We are presently in low orbit, at coordinates . . ." He pauses to check a comp screen. "X-ray one-eight-point-nine, Yankee four-seven-point-five, Zulu three-three-zero, distance eighteen nautical miles and closing. Do you copy? Over."

"Understood, *Helms,*" the voice says after a moment. "We have acquired you. Please stand by."

"Understood. Standing by." Again, Lee muffles his headset. "Not good," he says quietly. "That's the second time they've called us the *Helms,* even though I first identified ourselves as the *Plymouth*."

"*Alabama* didn't have a shuttle called the *Plymouth,*" Dana says. "Maybe they . . ."

"*Plymouth,* do you receive?" A new voice: feminine, with an accent that sounds vaguely Hispanic. "*Es* . . . this is Matriarch Luisa Hernandez, commander of *Glorious Destiny*. With whom am I speaking, *por favor?* Over."

"Got it right this time," Lee says, then he takes his hand from the mike. "This is Captain Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the URSS *Alabama*. Good to hear you, Captain . . . I mean, Matriarch Hernandez. Welcome to Coyote. Over."

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Another pause, only this time they can hear other voices in the background. Wendy listens hard, but she can't make out what they're saying; it sounds like a polyglot of English, Spanish, and French. The others seem just as perplexed; Lee looks over at Tinsley, shakes his head.

"Thank you, Captain Lee," Matriarch Hernandez says haltingly after a few moments. "We're certainly . . . ah, pleased to learn that you're still alive." Now Wendy knows it's not her imagination; *Glorious Destiny*'s commander speaks English only as a second language. "We have . . . um, attempted to contact you previous, but . . . ah, until now, there has been no response."

Lee's prepared for this. "My apologies, Matriarch Hernandez. Our communications system is rather deficient." A blatant lie, but one that hides the fact that the colony is unwilling to expose its location through high-gain radio transmissions. "When we saw you coming, we launched a shuttle to intercept your ship. May we have permission to rendezvous and dock with you, please? Over."

This time, the delay is even longer. Almost a minute passes before Hernandez comes back on line once more. "You have permission, Captain Lee. Our external docking hatch is located on the forward section of our vessel. It will be marked by a blinking red beacon. One of my crew will meet you at the airlock."

"Understood, Matriarch Hernandez. We'll be docking in about a half-hour. I'm looking forward to meeting you. *Plymouth* over and out." He clicks off the comlink, looks at the others. "What do you make of that?"

"So far, so good," Tinsley says quietly. "But why do I have a bad feeling about this?"

"Same here," Lee replies. "But they're opening the front door."

The ship is huge, much larger than anyone suspected. Over twelve hundred feet long, it's more than twice the length of the *Alabama,* and at least three times more massive: two enormous cylinders, each about five hundred feet in length, joined at the center by a slightly smaller midsection. The forward section is encircled by rows of perpendicular windows, indicating the presence of at least five passenger decks, yet there are also portholes within the hemispherical bulge that protrudes from its blunt bow.

The aft section is more mysterious. Elevated above the otherwise featureless cylinder are four long convex vanes, running parallel to the hull; wedge-shaped flanges rise from the rear of the vanes, just past which is the giant bell of the fusion engine. At first Lee thinks they may be heat radiators, yet as the *Plymouth* moves closer he hears a low whistle from behind his seat.

"Got an idea what those things are?" he asks, peering over his shoulder at Henry.

"I'll be damned." The astrophysicist is clearly awestruck. "I think these people have a diametric drive." He points to the vanes. "If I'm right, those are field generators." Then he gestures to another set of flanges at the front of the ship; these are folded down against the hull. "Positive and negative polarities would be generated from either end of the ship, so that it creates an asymmetric field around itself. In that way, it warps spacetime around itself and . . ."

"You mean, like a wormhole or something?" Wendy asks.

Henry shakes his head. "No, no . . . nothing so exotic. This is something else. The concept goes all the way back to the mid-twentieth century. My team at Marshall played with it for a while, but no one could figure out how

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to make it work, so we stuck to developing a Bussard engine. But it looks like someone came along behind us and licked the energy-conservation problem. Probably using zero-point energy as a power source."

"Then why include a fusion engine?" Dana asks. "That's like putting a mule harness on a race car."

"Probably to boost the ship to sufficient velocity so that the field would take effect, and to slow it down again once it reaches . . ."

"That's all very interesting," Lee interrupts, impatient with the discussion, "but you haven't told me one thing . . . how fast would it go?"

"I don't know. How fast do you want it to go?" Henry shrugs. "I don't mean to sound facetious, but in theory a diametric drive could accelerate a ship to within a few percentiles of light-speed."

"If that's the case . . ." Jud doesn't finish the thought, nor does he have to. If *Glorious Destiny* traveled to 47 Ursae Majoris at velocities approaching the speed of light, then it would have been launched from Earth within the last fifty years.

By now the starship fills the cockpit windows. Jud has matched velocity with the giant vessel; now he's carefully moving in. "There's our docking port," he murmurs, not taking his hands off the yoke as he gently maneuvers the shuttle upside-down toward a rectangular superstructure rising between a couple of flanges; a red beacon strobes next to a docking collar. "Looks easy enough."

"Sure." For the moment, Lee's distracted by something else: halfway down the cylindrical hull, just below the rows of portholes, he's noticed what appears to be a closed pair of double-doors, large enough for a shuttle to fly through. A quarter of the way around the hull, he spots an identical hatch.

Shuttle hangars? More than likely . . . and if there are more than just these two, then *Glorious Destiny* must be carrying at least four landing craft, each possibly the size of the *Plymouth*.

How many people are aboard this thing? He snatches his mind away from these thoughts, focuses on the task of helping Jud guide the shuttle in for docking. Shifting his eyes between the radar screen and the windows, he calls out numbers while Jud moves the yoke a few fractions of an inch at a time, easing the shuttle toward the docking collar. At last there's a hard thump as the *Plymouth*'s dorsal hatch mates with the ship.

"We're here." Jud's hands move across the instrument panel, putting the engines on stand-by. He checks a screen, gives Lee a nod. "Docking probe shows equal pressure on both sides. You should be able to go right in."

Lee unlatches his shoulder harness while Jud remains in his seat; the pilot is staying behind to prevent anyone from coming aboard during their absence. Lee turns to the others. "We can get out of our flight gear now. Ellery put some old *Alabama* jumpsuits aboard before we left . . . they're stowed in the lockers in the back of the passenger compartment. We'll take a few minutes to change before we pop the hatch."

Henry and Wendy sigh with relief; they're not used to wearing spacesuits, and leaving them behind would be a blessing. Before they turn to leave the cockpit, though, Lee holds up a hand. "Just a second . . . let's get one thing clear before we go in. We don't know who we're dealing with, so let me do the talking. Is that all right with you?"

Henry nods reluctantly, but Wendy is less sanguine. "How are we supposed to learn anything if we can't ask questions?"

"Ask all the questions you want," Lee replies. "I hope you do, in fact. But

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these people are going to have some questions of their own, and for the time being I'd prefer to be the only one who gives them answers. Understood?"

She slowly nods, and Lee gives her a reassuring smile. "All right, then. Let's go meet the new neighbors."

Liberty: Raphaël, Gabriel 18 / 0052

The night is colder than it has any right to be. Heavy clouds hide Bear from sight; a brutal wind moans through town, blowing new-fallen snow off rooftops, causing shutters to clatter softly against window-frames. The town is dark; everyone has gone to bed.

Almost everyone. Hood pulled up around his head, scarf tied across his nose and mouth, Tony Lucchesi stamps through the snow, gloved hand gripping the shoulder-strap of his rifle. Tough luck to have drawn the graveyard shift; it was originally Boone's turn, but since he came down with a bad cold earlier today, Chief Schmidt picked Tony to take his place on the night watch.

Not that it's necessary to have anyone on patrol after midnight this time of year. The boids migrated south months ago, the swampers have gone into hibernation within the ball-plants, and even the creek cats know better than to come out on a night like this. But the Town Council, in its infinite wisdom, has ordained that the blue-shirts keep someone on duty twenty-seven hours a day, nine days a week. Like it's really necessary.

Tony's tempted to return to the Prefect barracks, curl up in a chair beside the stove, and steal a few hours of shut-eye before the sun comes up. A former URS soldier, though, he's one of Gill Reese's men; the colonel may be long dead, but his ghost still haunts the grunts who once served under him, and Gill would have kicked the ass of anyone caught sleeping on guard duty. So Tony staggers down Main Street, and hopes the barracks coffee is still warm by the time he completes his hourly swing through town.

Tony reaches the grange and is about to turn and head back the other way when he notices something odd: a faint blue light, glowing between the cracks of the shutters of one of the rear windows. That would be the comp in the mayor's office; he's seen this before, when either Lee or Monroe are working late. Both of them are gone, though, so no one should be in there, least of all at this ungodly hour.

Damn. One of them must have left the comp switched on. A minor thing, really, but since the aerostat went down last month everyone's been urged to conserve electricity. So Tony mutters an obscenity into his scarf as he tramps up the front steps of the grange. . . .

And finds something else unusual: the front door, normally shut by this time, is slightly ajar, as if the wind has blown it open. With the exception of the armory and the mess hall kitchen, there are no locks on any of the doors of Liberty's public places, simply because there's no need for them. Theft is almost non-existent within the colony—why steal anything when you can have it merely by asking?—and locks themselves are a valuable commodity. And the last person to leave the grange at night always shuts the door behind them . . .

Tony's training takes over; he's no longer a blue-shirt performing a thankless task, but a URS soldier making a sweep. Pulling his rifle from his shoulder, he flicks off the safety and switches on the infrared range finder then lowers the monocle form his head strap. Carefully pushing open the door, he

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steps into the foyer, quietly closing the door behind him. Noting the empty coathooks, he unlatches the inside door and tiptoes into the meeting hall.

He raises the rifle to eye-level, uses its infrared beam to guide him through the dark hall. The door leading to the offices in the back of the building is open; he peers around the corner, sees the blue glow coming from beneath the door of Captain Lee's office. The door is shut, but he can make out a soft clatter of someone typing at a keyboard.

One step at a time, Tony inches down the corridor, back pressed against the wall, rifle at waist level. As he reaches the door, a floorboard creaks beneath his boot. He stops, holds his breath. Unseen hands pause at the keyboard; for a few seconds all Tony can hear is the hollow groan of the wind. Then once again the typing resumes.

Tony lays his left hand on the doorknob. He counts to three, then throws open the door. "Freeze!" he yells, bringing the rifle up into firing position. "Don't move!"

Startled, the figure silhouetted against the comp screen whips around. "I said don't move!" Tony snaps. "Stay right there!"

"Okay, okay! Don't shoot!" The voice is young, male, badly frightened; he raises his hands slightly, and now Tony sees he's still wearing a parka. "I give up, all right?"

"Good. Keep it that way." Switching his grip on the rifle, Tony fumbles along the wall next to the door until he locates the light switch. The ceiling panel flashes on, and Tony tries not to wince in the sudden glare.

Chris Levin is seated at the mayor's desk, his eyes wide with fear. Tony dislikes Levin; a couple of months ago he hauled the kid down to the stockade after he took a poke at Carlos Montero, and he's been on the perp list for one thing or another ever since, usually drunk and disorderly. Breaking and entering is a new low, though.

"What are you doing here?" Tony doesn't lower the rifle even though it's clear that Chris is unarmed.

"Tony, man, take it easy. I just wanted to use the comp, that's all. My pad fried out, and I just . . ."

Chris starts to rise, and as he does so his right hand drifts to the keyboard. "I told you to freeze," Tony says, "and I meant it. Now put your hands on your head." Chris obediently folds them atop his skull. "Now step away from the desk . . . easy does it."

"C'mon." Chris essays a smile that trembles at the corners of his mouth. "I'm sorry if I . . . I mean, y'know, it's a mistake. Nothing to get worked up about."

For a moment, Tony's inclined to agree. The kid sneaks into the mayor's office after midnight to steal some comp time. No reason to put him under arrest; just send him home and enter the incident in the logbook once he returns to the barracks. Tony's almost ready to lower his rifle when he happens to glance at the comp.

On the upper half of the screen is a schematic image of Coyote, with spots depicting the positions of the three spacecraft orbiting around it: *Alabama* on one side of the planet, *Plymouth* and *Glorious Destiny* on the other. A real-time display of the positions of all three ships. *Glorious Destiny* and *Plymouth* are nearly on top of one another, and both are almost directly above New Florida.

A dotted line leads from Liberty to *Glorious Destiny*. As Tony watches, it moves to track the Earth ship across the sky. And now he sees the highlighted bar separating the upper and lower halves of the screen—GROUND

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TELEMETRY LINK—and below it, several lines of script. From this distance, he can't make out the print, yet he can discern what looks like latitude and longitude numbers.

Tony feels a cold pulse at his temples. He's heard the standing order: no further radio contact with the Earth ship until *Plymouth* returns. *Oh, Christ! He couldn't have. . . !*

"On the floor, Levin! Now!"

"I'm telling you, it's. . . !"

"Shut up and do what I say! On the deck!"

Chris throws himself to the floor, his hands still locked together on his head. Tony kicks aside the chair, keeps the gun barrel centered on his back. He reaches into his parka, pulls out the com unit, presses the pound key and the digit two, raises it to his ear.

"Chief, it's night watch. Tony. I'm at the grange, in the mayor's office. Get down here, we've got a problem." Tony looks again at the screen. "Better wake up Tom Shapiro, too. It's serious."

WHSS *Glorious Destiny*: Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 0102

The inner airlock hatch cycles open, revealing a compartment not much different from the ready-room of the *Alabama*. Someone's waiting for them: six feet tall, wearing a long black cloak with a raised cowl, standing on what first appears to be the room's far wall until Lee reorients himself and sees that it's actually the floor.

"Welcome aboard." The voice has a slight electronic burr to it, but it's not until the figure raises a skeletal metal hand from beneath its cloak that Lee realizes it belongs to a robot. Glass eyes the color of rubies peer at him from a skull-like face; it motions toward elastic foot restraints arranged along the floor. "We'll soon be rephasing the ship's local field," it continues. "The transition will be gradual, of course, but we don't wish you to be harmed in the meantime."

Now Lee recognizes the voice as the same they heard during the original radio transmission. "Thank you," he says, pushing himself over to the nearest stirrups; behind him, Dana, Henry, and Wendy have floated into the compartment. "I take it your ship has . . . ah, artificial gravity of some sort."

"Artificial gravity?" Unexpectedly, dry laughter emerges from its mouth grill. "I suppose you could call it that. We refer to it as a Millis-Clement Field, but artificial gravity will do. We dephased it to facilitate docking procedures." The figure's other hand appears, holding a plastic bag. "Put these on, please. You'll be subjected to a brief period of ultraviolet radiation, for purposes of decontamination."

Lee takes the bag, opens it, pulls out a pair of wraparound sunglasses. Obviously meant to protect their eyes. "I assure you, we're not carrying any dangerous microorganisms."

"You're probably not. I apologize if you're offended. Merely a precaution." Again, the eerie laugh. "Besides, it'll give us a chance to talk before you meet Matriarch Hernandez."

"No offense taken. We understand." Lee puts on the glasses, passes the bag to Dana. She and the others have already fitted their feet into the stirrups; now it looks as if everyone is standing on the wall. "I'm Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the . . ."

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"Of course I recognize you, Captain Lee. I've thoroughly studied the *Alabama* incident . . . something of an interest of mine. It's quite an honor to meet you, sir." Its right hand comes up, palm open. "I'm Savant Manuel Castro . . . please, call me Manny."

Lee clasps the steel hand, finds its grasp remarkably gentle. "Pleased to meet you."

"Doesn't sound much like a 'bot," Wendy murmurs.

Manny's head makes an audible click as it turns in her direction. "What makes you think I'm a robot?"

Her eyes widen, but before she can say anything a loud gong reverberates through the compartment. "That's the thirty-second warning," Manny says. "Everyone, please put on your glasses and make sure your feet are secure. There are handrails behind you if you need them. This won't last long, I promise."

The ceiling panels grow brighter, emitting a bright-blue hue. Lee feels the soles of his shoes gradually settle against the floor. "You said . . ." Henry begins, then stops to grab the railing behind him. "You mean you're not a 'bot?"

"Strictly speaking, no. Old English terms for my condition would be 'android' or perhaps 'cyborg,' but even those are inadequate. Technically speaking, I'm a post human . . . a human intelligence transferred into a mechanistic form. A savant. Until seventy-eight years ago, my body was flesh and blood, but then . . ." A pause. "Let's just say that I opted for a longer lifespan."

"Is . . . uh, everyone aboard ship like you?" An expression of horror on Dana's face.

"Forgive me. This must be a shock to you. No, not everyone aboard is posthuman. In fact, only ten of us are savants. The rest are baseline humans, just like you, although most are still in biostasis. My fellow savants and I remained awake during the voyage."

"Tell us about your ship, please," Lee says. "It's quite impressive."

"Thank you." Manny nods, an oddly human gesture. "We're quite proud of it. The full name is *Seeking Glorious Destiny Among the Stars for the Greater Good of Social Collectivism . . . Glorious Destiny,* for short. It was constructed in lunar orbit by the Western Hemisphere Union, a federation of twenty-one provinces in North and South America formed in 2096 by the Treaty of Havana, and it was launched from lunar orbit on June 16, 2256."

"That's . . ." Dana mentally calculates. "Forty-eight years ago."

"Forty-eight years, nine months, two weeks, and three days, including the three weeks it took for the ship to accelerate to cruise velocity and three more weeks for deceleration. Of course, since we traveled here at 95 percent light-speed, according to the ship's internal clock it seems as if only fifteen years, six months, and three days have gone by, which means that by our reckoning it's December 19, 2271 . . . which means we've arrived about twenty-nine years before the *Alabama*. Makes sense, yes?"

Lee manages a wan smile. "We threw out the Gregorian calendar a long time ago. I take it your . . . ah, field . . . is what allowed you to achieve sublight velocity."

"The Millis-Clement Field is a manifestation of our diametric drive, yes," Manny replies, and Lee notes the smug look on Henry's face; his deduction turned out to be correct. "The matriarch will give you a detailed synopsis of our means of propulsion, if you wish."

Lee feels heavier; the sensation of weight, denied while aboard *Plymouth,* is slowly returning to him. "I'm sorry if this is uncomfortable," Manny says.

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"Sit down if it makes you feel better . . . you shouldn't need the foot restraints now. Captain Lee, I don't think I've had the pleasure of meeting the rest of your party. Is it too late for introductions?"

"Not at all." Lee turns to the others. "This is Dana Monroe. . . ."

"Ah, yes . . . *Alabama*'s Chief Engineer. History records that you were one of those who instigated the takeover. A pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

If Dana is flattered, she keeps it to herself; she gives Manny a distrustful nod. "And this is Dr. Henry Johnson," Lee continues. "Astrophysicist, a civilian passenger . . ."

"I believe you were one of the so-called dissident intellectuals involved in the conspiracy. An honor to meet you, too, sir." Clearly pleased by the notoriety, Henry grins, takes a short bow.

"And finally, Wendy Gunther, a member of our colony's Town Council. . . ."

"Wendy Gunther." A slight pause as Manny regards her with his strange eyes. "Oh, but of course . . . one of the children who was aboard. You're a bit older now."

"You could say that." Wendy has pulled out her pad, set it to voice-record mmode; she scarcely glances up at him. "Last time I checked, I was two hundred and forty-nine years old."

Again, the weird laugh. "I must say, you don't look a day over eighteen."

"Nineteen, actually, but who's counting?" Wendy smiles.

"A pleasure to meet you, particularly considering your father's role in the hijacking."

Oh my God, Lee thinks, *he knows . . .*

"What do you mean?" Wendy looks up sharply, her brow furrowed in puzzlement. "My father wasn't part of the conspiracy. He was a Party loyalist . . . A life support engineer."

"You speak of him in past tense. I take it he's no longer alive."

"He was killed in an accident, just after *Alabama* arrived. What do you. . . ?"

The gong sounds again, interrupting her, as the ceiling resumes its normal appearance. "Transition completed," Manny says, slipping his feet from the stirrups. "If you'll follow me, please, I'll take you to the matriarch. She's anxious to meet you."

There's a haunted look in Wendy's eyes; Lee now knows that it was foolish to have brought her along. He could easily order her to return to the *Plymouth,* but that would solve nothing. As she walks past him, following Manny toward a hatch on the other side of the compartment, she briefly meets his gaze, and in that moment he realizes she knows he's lied to her. Indeed, perhaps she's suspected it all along.

Nothing he can do about it now. All he can do is wait for her to discover the truth.

The passageway down which Manny escorts them is wide enough for two people to walk abreast, yet it's strangely vacant, and silent save for the background hum of the ship. They pass closed doors marked with words in a language Lee doesn't recognize. Without explanation, the savant leads them into a lift. He utters a foreign word; the doors iris shut and the cab begins to rise.

"Excuse me," Henry asks, "but what language are you using?"

"English." If Manny could smile, Lee could swear that he's doing so now. "*Anglo,* to use the proper term. English has changed quite a bit over the last two centuries. Only the savants and a handful of the crew are fluent in the older form. You'll have to forgive the matriarch when you meet her . . . she

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knows enough to get by, but it's still new to her. That's the reason I've been sent to greet you . . . besides being your guide, I'm also your translator."

"You just mentioned the crew," Lee says. "How many are aboard?"

Manny replies with something in Anglo. "Loosely translated," he adds, "it means, 'all good things in all good time.'"

Lee says nothing. At least the numerals on the control panel are Arabic; they boarded on level 8, and now it looks as if they're heading for 12. If they have to make an escape, this is useful information.

The lift opens, revealing darkness. Lee steps out, looks up . . . and finds Coyote hovering directly above him.

The effect is startling; it's as if he's standing outside the ship, with nothing separating him from the void. Coyote fills the star-flecked black sky; through patches of clouds he can see the Great Equatorial River meandering past yet-unnamed islands, with Bear rising just beyond the horizon. For an instant it seems as if the walls have disappeared, until he looks down again and sees himself surrounded by tiered rings of varicolored lights: instrument consoles, arranged on two open decks, with the cowled forms of other savants silhouetted before them.

"Our command center." Manny has quietly come up behind him. "We're in the bow. The view is projected by the ceiling . . . artificial, of course."

Lee stares up at the dome. The ship is somewhere above the eastern hemisphere; now he can make out a dense, spiral-shaped cloud formation above the equator. The winter storm is still moving eastward, churning its way toward the other side of the planet. The winds are probably already rising back in Liberty; they can't remain aboard *Glorious Destiny* much longer, or it'll soon be too dangerous for *Plymouth* to attempt a landing.

"Very impressive," he says, pretending a nonchalance he doesn't feel, "but our time is rather short. If you could take me to Matriarch Hernandez . . ."

"Captain Lee, I am here."

A woman emerges from the shadows, her hands folded together. Dressed in a gold-trimmed blue robe, her auburn hair cut close to her scalp, she seems to be middle-aged, her face plain yet her eyes sharp and piercing. She steps into the light, raises a hand palm outward, a formal salutation. "Matriarch Luisa Hernandez, I am," she says haltingly, her accent so thick it's difficult to understand her. "Meeting you . . . pardon . . . it is a pleasure to meet you, Captain. No . . . an honor, instead. I have not . . . never I have . . ."

Frustrated, she shakes her head, then turns to Manny and says something in Anglo. "The matriarch is embarrassed by her lack of language skills," Manny says after a moment. "She's honored to meet someone who occupies such a heroic place in history. Indeed, were it not for the actions of you and your brave crew, the United Republic of America might have never fallen, and so this conversation would not be taking place."

"I don't understand." Lee looks back at the matriarch. "What do you mean by that?"

She speaks to Manny once more before she looks back at Lee. "Savant Castro explains better than can I," she says.

"The matriarch has asked me to provide a brief historical summary," Manny says. "It's important that you know these things. When you stole the *Alabama,* it was the first of a chain of events that eventually led to the URA being toppled by domestic insurrection. A few months after you left, government news agencies officially reported that the ship had been destroyed . . . an act of sabotage perpetrated by a member of its crew. The fact that Eric Gun-

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ther's daughter is among us only further confirms that this was an untruth, that he was aa operative placed aboard by the Internal Security Agency. . . ."

"My father?" Wendy's voice is strangled, disbelieving. "I don't . . . are you saying my father was a saboteur?"

Manny says something in Anglo to the matriarch. Her eyes grow wide; no longer stoical, she regards Wendy with astonishment. "This thing . . . you do not know?"

Lee turns, sees Wendy's confusion. "I couldn't tell you," he says quietly, taking a step toward her. "I'm sorry, but . . ."

"You knew?" She backs away. "You knew my. . . ?"

"Wendy, please listen to me. The government placed your father aboard the ship to blow it up in case it was hijacked. He never intended to carry out those orders . . . he brought you aboard, didn't he? I didn't know any of this until after we arrived, when he tried to kill me, because he was still loyal to the Party. . . ."

"So it wasn't an accident." Now there's cold fury in her eyes. "You killed him . . . or had him killed."

"Wendy, no. That's not the way it was." Lee steps closer toward her; she starts to back away, but he grasps her arms. "There's more to this than they know," he says, his voice low, "but this isn't the time to . . ."

"So when were you going to tell me?" She stares back at him. "Or were you ever going to. . . ?"

"I'll tell you everything, but not now." Lee lets go of her. "Right now, I need you to stay calm, and record everything that's being said. You told me you could do this . . . Now I'm depending on you. Can you do that? Please?"

Wendy doesn't respond, only looks down at the floor. After a moment, she nods her head. Dana moves closer, puts her arm around her shoulders, offering comfort to her. Without a word, Wendy raises her pad; her hand shakes as she makes notes with her stylus.

There's an uncomfortable silence within the command center. The savants have turned to watch, their ruby eyes glittering in the darkness. Lee lets out his breath, turns back toward the matriarch. "My apologies," he says. "This is . . . something she didn't know."

The matriarch gives a sympathetic nod, says something in Anglo. Manny listens, looks at Lee. "Our fault for having brought up a matter that shouldn't have been discussed."

"Thank you." Lee straightens his shoulders. He still has a mission to perform. "You were saying. . . ? About the insurrection . . ."

"Yes, of course. The government attempted to claim that *Alabama* was destroyed by sabotage three months after launch, but then the underground net provided evidence that it was hijacked from Highgate, with you yourself as the conspiracy's leader. When the government couldn't deny this any longer, it produced one of the main conspirators, the former director of the Internal Security Agency. . . ."

"Roland Shaw. Yes, he helped us get away." Lee remembers the last time he saw Shaw: he shook his hand at the launch just before he boarded the shuttle. *I hope you find what you're looking for,* he said. "What happened to him?"

"The government put him on trial for high treason. He was found guilty and publicly executed." Lee winces, and Manny hesitates before continuing. "It wasn't an empty death. The organization he helped build gained more converts, and the fact that the *Alabama* had been stolen demonstrated that the government was not as indomitable as it once seemed. Small groups of

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insurgents began making contact with one another, forming networks. Within months, there were acts of sabotage all across the Republic. . . ."

"Remember the *Alabama*." There's a hint of a smile on the matriarch's face as she raises her hands to form the thumbs, forefingers, and index fingers in an A shape.

"That was the sign of revolution," Manny explains. "It took nearly twenty-six years for it to gain sufficient strength to topple the government, yet in the end a mob stormed the capitol and placed President Rochelle under arrest. . . ."

"Joseph Rochelle?" Lee raises an eyebrow. "My father-in-law became president?"

"No . . . Elise Rochelle, his daughter. Your former wife . . . she stopped using your name after you left. Elected by Congress to life-term following . . ."

"Never mind why. What happened to her?"

"She was supposed to stand trial in Havana for crimes against humanity, but she took her own life before it got that far. She . . ."

"Crimes against humanity?" Lee stares at him in shock. "What sort of crimes?"

"The underground movement didn't act alone. It managed to gain assistance from outside the Republic. New England, Canada, and Pacifica were the strongholds . . . arms were smuggled across the borders, government comps were cracked, fugitives taken into hiding. When President Rochelle became aware of this, she ordered bioweapons strikes against Boston, Seattle, and Montreal. Over eight hundred thousand people were killed by superflu in New England and Canada, and nearly three hundred thousand died in Pacifica."

Lee closes his eyes, lowers his head. He'd fallen out of love with Elise long before he decided to steal the *Alabama,* and just before he'd left Earth she had attempted to betray him to the ISA, only to be thwarted at the last minute by Roland Shaw, an act for which he eventually paid with his life. She had always been cold, yet he would never have believed her to be capable of such evil. Somehow, in the intervening years, the Liberty Party must have twisted her soul, transforming her into a monster. . . .

He feels a hand touch his arm. Looking up, he finds Henry Johnson next to him. "You okay?" he whispers. Feeling numb, Lee nods. Henry turns to the matriarch. "Why are you telling us this? What does it have to do with why you're. . . ?"

She holds up a hand. "Patience. All to be explained." To Manny: "Continue."

"After the Liberty Party was overthrown," the savant says, "the government collapsed virtually overnight. What used to be known as the United Republic of America had become an anarchy. Thousands more perished over the course of the following months, either from plague, starvation, or random violence. During the crisis, the countries bordering the Republic and elsewhere in the Americas formed the Western Hemisphere Union, with its capitol in Havana, in the neutral nation of Cuba."

"You said something about that," Lee murmurs. "The Treaty of Havana, signed in . . . What was the date?"

"April 26, 2096. Liberation Day, as it's now known. The first major act of the WHU was to dispatch military troops to North America to restore civil order and provide humanitarian relief. Once this was accomplished, the Union set forth to rebuild *El Norte* . . . not as an independent nation, but as a province under the stewardship of the WHU."

Lee stares in disbelief at the matriarch "You're saying my country no

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longer exists?" Manny interprets, and she nods gravely. "And what sort of government did you install?"

"Social collectivism." Her chin lifts with pride.

"Under social collectivism," Manny says, "all individuals are treated as treated as equals. The barriers that once divided people—capitalism, class status, racial inequality, so on—have been eradicated, replaced by a system that rewards the individual on the basis of his or her contributions to the greater good. No one is rich. No one is poor. There is no hunger, no civil strife, no political turmoil. . . ."

"Sounds familiar." Henry murmurs. "I think that was tried before. Russia, Eastern Europe, and China, during the twentieth century."

The matriarch appears baffled; she doesn't understand what he just said. "You're alluding to Marxist socialism," Manny replies. "An early version of collectivism, quite crude in execution. Our system is different. Believe me when I tell you that collectivism works. It's not only responsible for rebuilding North America, but it's also allowed us to make the technological advances that have made ships like this possible. Were it not for collectivist theory . . ."

"Just a moment," Lee says. "What you just said . . . 'ships like this.' Are you telling us that there's more than one?"

Matriarch Hernandez apparently understands this, for she smiles. "*Glorious Destiny,* only one . . . the first. More there are. See."

She raises her left arm from beneath her robe, touches her bracelet, and the dome above them changes.

Lee looks up, sees the Moon as seen from Lagrangian orbit. Scattered in a broad swath across space are three giant vessels identical to *Glorious Destiny,* each in various states of construction—some mere skeletons, others near completion—surrounded by dozens of tiny vehicles, moving back and forth, transporting hull segments from one place to another. In the far distance, he can make out a ring-shaped space station, possibly a construction base. A shipyard, more vast than any ever built before.

"This is Highgate," Manny says, "as we saw it shortly before we left. The vessels you see are three of our five sister ships, each capable of carrying one thousand colonists in biostasis. . . ."

"A thousand. . . ?"

"Yes, Captain. *Glorious Destiny* carries a total complement of one thousand. You haven't seen them because they haven't been revived yet. Unless there were any unforeseen setbacks during the last forty-eight years, the remaining five ships of our fleet should be arriving over the course of the next three Earth years."

The scene above him is already history, an artifact of the past. Even now, distant from one another by only a matter of light-years, a convoy of leviathans race toward them at sub-light velocity, bearing thousands of passengers in deep hibernation. . . .

"We are coming to Coyote," Matriarch Hernandez says slowly, choosing her words with great deliberation. "Seeking glorious destiny among the stars, for the greater good of social collectivism."

Liberty: Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 1917

"Order! Order, please!"

The gavel bangs sharply against the table, yet it's swallowed by the tu-

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mult of upraised voices. Throughout the jammed grange hall, men and women have risen to their feet, yelling to be heard above each other. At the front of the room, the members of the Town Council sit nervously behind the head table, a couple of them obviously wishing they could be anywhere but here.

Seated in the audience, Susan cradled in his arms, Carlos watches Wendy from across the room. She sits bolt upright at the council table, her hands clasped together, her face drawn tight. Little more than an hour has passed since the *Plymouth* returned, and they've barely spoken since he met her at the landing pad, yet it seems as if she's joined the rest of the council only with great reluctance. Something's troubling her, but whatever it is, she's refused to tell him about it.

"Everyone, please sit down!" Once again, Captain Lee pounds his gavel. "We have to get through this, and we're short of time!"

Gradually, the noise begins to subside, as those who were standing reluctantly take their seats again. Now several hands have been raised. Tom Shapiro nudges Lee, whispers something to him; he nods, then looks back at the audience. "Let me finish, then we'll proceed with open discussion. But, please, everyone . . . we need to keep this on track, so be patient just a little while longer."

Scanning the crowd, Carlos sees expressions of fear, anger, even panic. Captain Lee slowly lets out his breath; like everyone else who made the trip up to *Glorious Destiny,* he appears ready to collapse from exhaustion, yet when he radioed from *Plymouth* shortly after departing the starship, he insisted that an emergency town meeting be held as soon as the shuttle touched down.

"I realize this comes as a shock," Lee continues once the room is quiet again. "Believe me, it was a surprise to the rest of us. I attempted to explain to Matriarch Hernandez that Liberty is barely capable of supporting a hundred people, let alone another thousand, but she doesn't understand our situation or . . ."

"What doesn't she understand?" This from Lew Geary, standing next to Carrie off to one side of the room. "We've only got enough food to get those of us here through the rest of winter. Except for what we raise in the greenhouse, it'll be at least three more months before we can plant the spring crops."

Murmurs through the audience. "I know that, and you know that," Lee says, "but either she doesn't believe me or she's chosen to ignore the facts. My feeling is that it's the latter. The political system she comes from . . . this 'social collectivism' . . . dictates that everyone shares everything in common. What's mine is also yours, simple as that."

"Then they stay in orbit," Lew says. "You just said that most of their crew is still in biostasis. They wait a few more months, then we can talk about feeding a few more mouths. . . ."

"More than a few, sounds like." This from Naomi Fisher, the chief cook. She's seated next to Carlos with her husband Patrick Molloy, one of the Marshall engineers who helped design the *Alabama*. Neither of them look very happy about what they've just heard.

"And where are we supposed to put all these guys?" Patrick demands. "In our homes? I mean, even if they remain in orbit until next spring, who's going to build shelters for them?"

Across the room, the noise level begins to rise once more. Susan stirs un-

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easily against his shoulder, and Carlos shifts her from one side of his lap to another; she thrusts her thumb into her mouth, and he gently pulls her hand away from her face. Lee bangs the gavel again. "Order, please . . . Pat, I don't know how the matriarch thinks we're capable of feeding and providing shelter for all her people, only that she expects us to do it. In her mind, the *Alabama* is the property of the former United Republic of America, which in turn came under control of the Western Hemisphere Union. Since we stole the *Alabama* and used it to establish a colony, we're part of the WHU. . . ."

"That's absurd!" Naomi snaps.

"I know . . . but try explaining that to them." Lee holds up a hand before he can be interrupted again. "Even if she's willing to keep her crew in biostasis for another few months, that only forestalls the situation. Liberty will have ten times as many people as we do now. . . ."

"So let 'em build their own colony." Ted LeMare calls out. "We've spent three and half Earth years learning how to live here . . . why can't they?"

Lee's about to answer this, but then Dana stands up from the first row. "For the record, I agree. Apparently they're expecting happy natives throwing out the red carpet. The matriarch doesn't know what we've been through to get to where we are now. . . ."

"Then tell 'em to go somewhere else!" someone shouts from the back of the room.

"You don't understand." Dana shakes her head. "Their ship . . . I mean, it's nearly three times the size of the *Alabama*. By sheer force of numbers alone, they can overwhelm us. Not only that, but their level of technology is over two hundred years in advance of ours. If . . . *when* . . . they start coming down, I don't know how we're going to be able to resist them."

From the first row, Jean Swenson raises her hand. Grateful that someone is abiding by parliamentary procedure, Lee points to her and she stands. "I thought the council decided to keep our location a secret," she says. "When did change?"

"It was indeed the council's decision to keep secret Liberty's whereabouts for as long as possible." Lee hesitates. "Unfortunately, that's no longer an option. Last night, an unauthorized radio transmission was made to the *Glorious Destiny* by a certain individual, during which he revealed our latitude and longitude. . . ."

Angry whispers. "Who the hell made that. . . ?" Patrick starts.

"I'm sorry, but I don't wish to discuss that." Lee looks pained. "That person has been detained, and once this meeting is adjourned the council will decide what measures should be taken."

Carlos glances toward where Sissy Levin is seated near the back of the room. He'd already heard about Chris. His mother sits alone, her hands folded together in her lap; her face is neutral, expressing no shame or remorse. Perhaps she believes that what Chris did was right. . . .

"At this point," Lee continues, "casting blame serves no real purpose. I don't think we could have kept our location secret for very much longer. Inevitably, they would have found us. The more important issue is what do we do when they arrive."

"When do you think they're coming?" Kim Newell says. Carlos sees that his sister Marie is sitting in her lap. "If we can expect them at any minute . . ."

"Fortunately, it won't be that soon." Lee forces a grim smile. "For one thing, the matriarch told me that most of her crew is still in biostasis. Only she and

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the . . . um, savants, whom I've told you about . . . are presently awake. I think we can reasonably expect that it'll take some time for them to revive a sufficient number of their passengers to form a landing party. For another, the winter storm we've been tracking over the past few days is definitely headed our way. Once it hits . . . probably two nights from now . . . it'll be impossible for any of their shuttles to land, until it blows over. So I guess this will give us a lead time of . . ."

He pauses. "Three, maybe four days. Then I think they'll start arriving."

An uneasy silence falls across the room. No one says anything, and Carlos can tell that it's all beginning to sink in. Lee waits a moment, then goes on. "So far as I can tell," he says, "we've only got two choices. First, we attempt to negotiate with the matriarch. Try to make her understand that we're unable to feed and shelter a thousand more settlers, or at least until springtime when we're able to plant crops. . . ."

"Okay, so what then?" Paul Dwyer says. "These people probably don't have any more of a clue as to how to support themselves than we did when we first got here. Which means that they're going to be dependent upon us. . . ."

"And so we're supposed to feed and provide shelter for a bunch of unwelcome guests?" someone else asks.

"Hell with that." Lew Geary crosses his arms. "If I wanted to live that way, I would've stayed home. At least with the Liberty Party I knew where I stood." Scattered laughter from around the room, and he nods. "This . . . what d'ya call it? . . . social collectivism sounds like the same crap we left behind, just with a different name."

Applause, even from those who were once party members. Gazing around the room, Carlos marvels at how much these people have changed. Less than a year and a half ago by Coyote reckoning, the colony had been divided between those who had once sworn allegiance to the URA and those who'd fled from the Republic. Yet together they'd endured the extremes of climate, suffered through deprivation and loss, and overcome hardships that might have broken lesser men and women. Any differences they once had were now forgotten, or at least rendered trivial; deep down, they'd found something within themselves that many of them probably didn't know was there: a spirit unwilling to surrender to anyone or anything.

Freedom does that to people, he realizes. Once you've tasted it, you never want to let go. But how much would they be willing to sacrifice to remain free?

"All right then," Lee says, "then that leaves us with our second option . . . we resist. Fight back. Don't let them set foot in Liberty."

Again, the room becomes quiet. Ron Schmidt, the chief of the blue-shirts, clears his throat as he raises his hand. Lee acknowledges him, and the former URS sergeant stands up. "The armory contains two long-range mortars, twenty-five carbines, and twelve sidearms, along with the twelve automatic machine guns that comprise our periphery defense system," he drawls. "During our last inventory, my people counted forty mortar shells, three hundred sixty-two rounds of 38-caliber parabellum ammo, two hundred and two flechettes . . . and, before I forget, ten longbows and eighty-two arrows."

The last might have been intended as a joke, but no one laughs. Carlos winces a bit; he fashioned those bows and arrows himself, and has trained the blue-shirts in their usage. But never to be used against other people. "Mr. Mayor," Schmidt continues, "in my opinion, we have sufficient materiel to deal with boids and creek-cats, but not a determined and well-armed ex-

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peditionary force. If someone seriously wants to take Liberty, they could do so within two or three days, even if we were determined to fight to the last man," He hesitates. "That is, if anyone cares to open fire on another human being. That's a matter you'd have to decide for yourselves."

There's an uncertain rumble through the room as Schmidt sits down. "Thanks, Ron, for your report." Lee says. "I appreciate your assessment." He glances at the rest of the council members, who've become ashen. "The chief has a point. Are we willing to go to war to protect ourselves? Is this a step we're ready to take?"

Voices are already rising—argument, counter-argument—yet Carlos suddenly doesn't hear them, for in that instant, something flashes through his mind.

Not so much an idea as a memory: a mural painted upon the walls of the *Alabama*'s ring corridor . . . Prince Rupurt, leading a procession of friends and allies across a mountain valley, taking them away from the forces that threatened to destroy them.

Without fully knowing what he's doing, Carlos turns to Naomi. "Would you hold Susan for a minute?"

Surprised, Naomi nods, gently takes Susan from his arms. Carlos hesitates, then raises a hand. "Pardon me . . . Mr. Mayor?" he calls out. "Mr. Mayor, may I speak, please?"

For a few moments, it doesn't seem as if Lee has heard him. Then he spots Carlos from across the room and points his way, formally acknowledging him. Wendy stares at Carlos in astonishment as he rises to his feet. Townspeople turn to gaze at him, and suddenly Carlos finds himself the center of attention. For a second, he wants to sit down again, remain silent.

"Mr. Montero," Lee says, "you have something to say?"

"Yes, sir," Carlos says. "I think . . . I believe there's another alternative."

Raphael, Gabriel 18 / 2310

The town stockade resembles one in name only; it's really a windowless one-room cabin next to the Prefect barracks. Originally intended to be a storehouse, it eventually became necessary to have it function as a jail. Even so, it's seldom used; very rarely does anyone cause enough trouble for the blue-shirts to place them under arrest, and punishment has usually been in the form of community service rather than incarceration.

Tony Lucchesi unlocks the front door, reaches in to turn on the light. "Levin? Wake up. You've got a visitor." A moment passes, then he steps aside to let Wendy pass. "Want me to hang around?"

"No thanks. I'll be okay." Chris is sitting up in bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. He gives her a reassuring nod; whatever else happens, the last thing he'll do is attack her. Wendy looks back at Tony, and he reluctantly shuts the door behind her. A rattle as the deadbolt is thrown.

"Well, hello," Chris says once they're alone. "This is a surprise." He gazes at the carafe in her hand. "Is that for me?"

"Uh-huh. Thought you might be cold out here." Wendy hands the carafe to him; he nods in gratitude, unscrews its cap. The stockade is sparsely furnished—a narrow cot, a chair, a wood-burning stove, a chamber pot in the corner—but at least it's reasonably warm. She watches as he pours black coffee into the cap. "Also thought you might want to talk."

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"What's there to talk about? Caught red-handed. Guilty as charged. End of story." He shrugs, takes a tentative sip. "Thanks for the coffee. Does the condemned man get a last meal, too?"

"That's not going to happen . . . I mean, if you think we're going to execute you." Wendy pulls off her shawl, takes a seat in the chair. "The council just met in executive session. We haven't quite decided what to do with you yet, but . . . well, that's why I'm here. They want to know why you did what you did."

"*They* want to know. . . ?"

"*I* want to know." Wendy shakes her head. "Chris, why? Why do something you knew would put everyone at risk?"

"Oh, c'mon." He shakes his head. "What do you think this is, high treason? If anything, I've saved everyone's lives. We're barely managed to scratch by down here. If that ship hadn't arrived, we'd probably all be dead in another two or three years. You guys want to hide in the swamp, go ahead. Me, I think we could use whatever goodies they've got aboard that ship. That's why I told 'em where we are."

"That sounds like self-justification."

He puts down the coffee, pulls the blanket off the bed and wraps it around his shoulders. "Yeah, maybe so. Maybe I don't know why myself." He hesitates. "You still haven't told me whether you think I'm a traitor."

She doesn't reply. Outside, the wind has picked up once more. On the other side of the door, she can hear muffled voices: men and women moving through town.

Even though it's close to the middle of the night, there's little time to lose. Soon the storm will be upon them, and the colony has to be ready before then.

"I know a little about betrayal," she says after a moment. "I learned something about my father today . . . something I didn't know before. He tried to play both sides, too . . . his personal interests against his loyalty to the Republic. In the end, when he had to choose between one or the other, he made the wrong choice, and he paid for his mistake with his life."

Chris peers at her. "I don't understand. What are you. . . ?"

"Never mind. It's a long story." She shakes her head. "What I'm trying to say is, nobody ever thinks of themselves as being a traitor. Deep inside, they always believe they're doing the right thing, even when it hurts someone else. That's what I think my father was doing . . . and I think that's why you did it, too."

"Sounds about right to me."

"You think so? You really mean it?"

"Uh-huh." Then he smiles. "And given a chance, I'd do it again . . . just the same way."

Again, Wendy doesn't answer immediately. She gazes at the man—the boy, really—for whom she once felt an attraction, who might have been her partner if things had worked out differently, and feels only a certain cold pity. He sits slumped on the bed, drinking the coffee she brought him; no regret, no guilt, only misplaced contempt.

"That's all I wanted to hear." She stands up. "Goodbye, Chris. I hope . . . I dunno. Maybe you'll finally work things out."

"Goodbye?" Chris gapes at her as she turns toward the door, raps on it. "What do you mean, goodbye? Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes, I am," Wendy says. "And where I'm going, you can't follow."

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Liberty: Kafziel, Gabriel 22 / 1038

The storm has passed, the sky has cleared. Now the town lies buried beneath fourteen inches of fresh snow that has drifted high against the log walls of cabins and glazed over their windows. Icicles like slender crystal daggers drape from roof eaves, the bright morning sun causing them to slowly drip into rain barrels below. A low breeze, cold and lonesome, murmurs through the snow-covered street, rattling closed shutters, whistling past chimneys from which no woodsmoke rises.

Wrapped in a thick blue cloak, hood raised over her head, Matriarch Hernandez stands in front of the grange hall and studies the still and silent town. Except for the handful of Union Guard soldiers making a house-to-house search, nothing moves; the snow lies thick and undisturbed save for their footprints.

The matriarch shudders, pulls her cloak tighter around herself. This world is much colder than she'd expected, its thin air difficult to breathe. Hearing a muted rumble from far above, she glances up, watches a shuttle as it races across the cloudless blue sky. Anticipating some form of resistance from the *Alabama* colonists, she'd instructed the second shuttle to land an hour after her own craft touched down on the outskirts of town. There are twenty armed soldiers aboard, ready to quell any rebellion, yet they aren't necessary now.

The town is abandoned, without life. In little more than three days, more than a hundred men, women, and children have vanished.

"Matriarch," a voice says from behind her. She turns, sees Savant Castro marching toward her, a stark black shadow against the whiteness. He can't feel the wind, of course, yet somehow she imagines it biting at him through his monkish cloak.

"What have you found?" she asks, speaking in Anglo. "Is there anyone left?"

"Only two. A young man and his mother." The savant stops before her, his spindly legs almost knee-deep in the snow. "We found them down the street, in what seems to be a jail. They were locked inside, although with sufficient food and water to last a few days."

"Locked in?" The matriarch is puzzled. "Why would they. . . ?"

"He identifies himself as the one who sent us the coordinates. He says the others don't trust him any more and decided to leave him behind. His mother elected to stay behind on her own."

"I see." The matriarch frowns. "So they would know where the others have gone."

"Unfortunately, they do not. They were put in jail two days ago. No one told them anything until then." Savant Castro points in the opposite direction. "I've just visited their landing pad. One of their shuttles is still here . . . the *Mayflower,* what used to be called the *Wallace* . . . but it's little more than an empty hull. They've cannibalized it of every usable component. . . ."

"What about the other craft? Any indication of when it lifted off?"

"The snow has covered its blast marks. That leads me to conclude that it probably departed before the storm arrived. That would have been at least two days ago."

Luisa Hernandez looks away, murmurs an obscenity beneath her fogged breath. Once her crew learned the location of the colony from the radio transmission they had received—apparently from the young colonist they've just found—shortly before Lee and his party had visited them, she'd

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tried to keep *Glorious Destiny* within sight of New Florida. Yet the planet rotated out of synch with her ship's orbit, and so there were many opportunities for a shuttle to lift off without being observed.

"Near the river, we've discovered what appears to be a shed meant for water craft," Castro continues. "Three large boats were once stored there, along with a number of smaller ones." When she looks at him again, he shakes his head. "They're all gone now."

And then the storm hit, and for the next two days several hundred miles of Coyote's western hemisphere had been shrouded by dense clouds. Sufficient time for the colonists to make their escape beneath the cover of the storm . . .

"And their homes?" She gestures to the primitive log cabins neatly arranged along the colony's major avenue. "Is there anything here that. . . ?"

"No, Matriarch," he says, and she nods. As her scouts have already discovered, the dwellings have been stripped down to bare walls, with only window glass and the heaviest pieces of furniture left behind. Everything that couldn't be replaced, the colonists took with them. Even electrical fixtures are gone, the wiring carefully removed from the walls and ceilings.

"We've found livestock pens," the savant says, "but the animals are missing. The grain silos are bare as well. There's nothing left in them."

Hearing this, Hernandez scowls. She'd been counting on the colony's food supply to get her advance team through the winter, until spring arrived and the colonists could cultivate sufficient crops to support the rest of *Glorious Destiny's* crew. She gazes at the ground, absently running the toe of her left boot through the snow. Her plans have been dealt a severe setback; she wonders what she might have said or done that gave Captain Lee some warning of her ambitions.

"Have you. . . ?" she begins, and at that moment the front door of the grange bangs open. Startled, she turns quickly, her hand reaching beneath her cloak for her sidearm, yet it's only the guardsman she sent into the meeting hall.

He halts on the snow-trampled steps, something beneath his right arm. "Pardon me, Matriarch," he stammers, his eyes wide as he perceives the gun in her hand. "I didn't . . ."

"Have you found something?" Savant Castro asks. The soldier nods. "Bring it here, please."

The soldier stumbles down the stairs, wades across the snow to where they're standing. "It was in a room in the back, on a table. They'd taken everything else, so I thought it might be important."

"Thank you." Hernandez takes it from the soldier: a swatch of colored fabric, very old, neatly folded. She carefully pulls it open, involuntarily sucks in her breath when she recognizes it for what it is. The flag of the United Republic of America. Back on Earth, they're only seen in museums. This one was probably given to the *Alabama* crew before they left Earth. A priceless historical artifact . . .

"There was also this." The soldier nervously extends a small slip of paper. "It was attached to the flag. Excuse my ignorance, Matriarch, but I don't know what it means."

Luisa Hernandez takes it from him. There's something written on it, but it's in Old English. Without asking, she hands it to Savant Castro.

He studies it for a moment. "Well done, Guardsman. You're dismissed." The soldier gives him a long look, then salutes and reluctantly walks away. Castro waits until he's out of earshot, then he reads the note aloud.

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East Channel: Kafziel, Gabriel 22 / 1101

"'This belongs to you. We have no use for it any longer, so you should keep it. Don't follow us, or we'll follow you.'"

"Excuse me, Captain? You said something?"

Lee looks around. Carlos stands in the longboat's stern, his hands on the tiller. Lee thought he'd been speaking to himself, but the young man apparently overheard him. "Never mind," he says. "Just something I left for the matriarch. I imagine she's found it by now."

Standing up from the grain sack upon which he's been seated, he props a foot upon the gunnel, gazes back the way they've come. The Eastern Divide is still just within sight, but it's falling below the horizon, its limestone bluffs swallowed by the cold waters of the East Channel. In a few minutes, New Florida will be gone. Enough time for one last look. . . .

"I don't think we've seen the last of 'em." Carlos peers over his shoulder. "In fact, I think we can count on it."

"If they're smart, they'll keep their distance." No doubt that the newcomers will try to find them; Lee guesses that *Glorious Destiny* will locate their whereabouts within a few weeks, if not sooner. But the matriarch only wanted Liberty, not the people who once lived there, and the note he left behind was his warning to stay away. Pinning it to the flag was a little more subtle. So far as he was concerned, there was little difference between the Republic and the Union: just another form of oppression justified by political ideology. The matriarch might or might not get the jab; it matters little to him.

A sly grin steals across Carlos's face. "Do I have to keep my distance, too?"

"I hope that doesn't mean what I think it means." When Carlos doesn't reply, Lee shakes his head. "That'll come later. Right now, we've got a lot of work ahead of us."

The broad deck is packed solid with sacks, crates, and equipment containers: all their belongings, or at least everything that could be salvaged from the colony and loaded aboard three thirty-four-foot boats. Their boat is bringing up the rear of the flotilla; ahead of them are the other longboats, escorted on either side by kayaks and canoes, their sails billowed by the cool easterly wind. Just as Carlos predicted, the storm flooded Sand Creek, raising the water level enough for the flat-bottomed boats to slip through the Shapiro Pass without foundering on the shoals.

In another couple of days, they'll reach the Montero Delta. Then they'll turn east and follow the southwestern coast of Midland until they reach the place where Carlos made camp last summer. The rest of the colonists, along with the livestock, have already gone ahead, airlifted to Midland by the *Plymouth* just before the storm swept across New Florida. They should have already made camp in the mountain valley Carlos found not far from where he built his treehouse.

Lee turns away, starts heading toward the bow, picking his way across bags of corn and beans, boxes of tools and spare parts, rolls of electrical wire and plastic tubing. Carlos knows where he's going; just now, there's someone else aboard he needs to see.

Wendy sits cross-legged on a sailboard, her back propped against the main mast. Her pad is open in her lap, yet she's paused to gaze back at New Florida. The breeze whips her hair across her face, the morning sun turning it from ash-blond to silver-grey; in that moment, she appears far older than

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her years, more world-weary than any girl her age should be. Lee hesitates—perhaps he should respect her solitude—but then she looks around, finds him standing behind her. Her expression is solemn, her eyes impartial.

"You want to talk about it?" he asks.

"Does it matter?"

"It should. At least it does to me." Lee finds a seat on a crate. Looking around, he catches a last glimpse of the Eastern Divide, now only a ragged dark line above the horizon. "If I didn't get a chance before to say I'm sorry . . ."

"You've done that already. What you didn't tell me is why."

There's no accusation in her voice. She simply wants to know. There are a dozen different lies he could tell her now, some more comforting than others, yet she'd see through any of them in a moment. In her face, he perceives the child she had once been; in her eyes, the woman she would become. He had to speak to the woman, not the child.

"I didn't kill your father," he begins. "Gill Reese did . . . he shot him in the back, aboard the *Alabama,* because he thought he was going to shoot me."

"Why did my father want to kill you?" Blunt. To the point.

"He said that I was a traitor, and that it was his duty to kill me." Lee pauses. "Please believe me when I tell you that I didn't want Gill to shoot him. I tried to get your father to give me his gun, and for a second or so I thought he would, but then he changed his mind and . . . well, Reese thought he was about to shoot me, and so he fired first. He died in my arms."

"What . . ." Her voice chokes a little; she clears her throat. "What were his last words?"

"'Long Live the Republic.'" Lee remembers the moment with terrible clarity. "But that's not what matters. The last thing he spoke of was you . . . he didn't want you to ever know why he was aboard. That was his greatest fear, I . . ."

He shakes his head. "No. That's not right. I don't think that's what frightened him. I think he was afraid of the future. He'd lived so long in the past, he didn't want to let it go. When he stole a gun and tried to kill me, he was trying to turn back the clock. But he couldn't do that, so . . ."

"I understand." She still doesn't look at him, but through her wind-blown hair he can see wetness on her face. "You want to know what's funny? I hardly knew him. I mean . . . he put me in a youth hostel so he could join the service, and I barely saw him again until he took me out to put me aboard the *Alabama.* What kind of lousy father would. . . ?"

"I don't know. Maybe a father who cared more for his daughter than he was willing to admit."

Her chin trembles, and now the tears come freely. Lee hesitates, wondering if this is the right thing to do, then he moves to sit next to her. She doesn't resist as he puts an arm around her shoulders; her head falls against his chest, and Lee holds her this way for a long time. The handful of other colonists aboard the boat pointedly ignore them; Carlos minds the tiller, careful not to look their way as he steers them closer toward Midland. New Florida has vanished, and now the boats are alone on the East Channel.

Wendy raises her head, snuffles a little, wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. "So . . . what's next, Captain? What do we do now?"

Robert E. Lee, descendent of a Confederate general, turns his eyes toward the south. "There's a whole new world out there," he says quietly. "Let's go find it." O

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

Introduction

The shelves are groaning here at Casa DiFi beneath the weight of innumerable newly minted small-press books. So without further procrastination, here's the latest installment of our regular survey.

Novels and Novellas

Anyone who has seen the surreal French animated film *Fantastic Planet* (1973) will have a good idea of the kinds of off-kilter excitements to be found in Rachel Armstrong's *The Gray's Anatomy* (Serpent's Tail, trade paper, $15.00, 240 pages, ISBN 1-85242-635-7). Blending Stanislaw Lem, Doris Lessing, and Barrington Bayley into a heady brew, Armstrong tells the story of a human-alien cosmos revamped by a new paradigm of physics, outdoing even quantum concepts in its outré implications. On the planet Rune 66, whose inhabitants resemble the classic UFO Gray aliens, one individual named the Chronicler manages to transport himself to a "time planet," a kind of interzone where human bodies lie in stasis. The Chronicler's experiments with these weird beings—*Homo sapiens* and beyond—are broadcast psychically back to Rune 66, altering the destiny of the entire planet. Armstrong employs a deadpan, quasi-scientific affect that makes the narrative all the stranger. This book definitely earns a place in the library of SF oddities.

How exciting to discover an early fantasist overlooked in the canonical history of SF! Such is the thrill provided with the publication of Paul Scheerbart's *The Gray Cloth* (MIT Press, hardcover, $24.95, 143 pages, ISBN 0-262-19460-0). Scheerbart (1863-1915) was a polymathish member of the German avant-garde with a fixation on, among other things, glass architecture. Viewing this new technology as offering utopian possibilities, Scheerbart wrote several narratives that sought to embody his vision of the idyllic future. *The Gray Cloth*, issued in 1914, was his magnum opus. *Cloth* follows the career of one Edgar Krug, master of glass architecture in the mid-twentieth century, as he flits about the globe in his private airship with his wife, Clara, herself an accomplished musician on the "tower organ." A combination of Bluebeard, Donald Trump, and Rupert Murdoch, Krug demands that his wife dress always and only in shades of gray, so as to better serve as a foil to his highly colored glass buildings. But after encountering the half-mad ruler of some islands off Oman, a Chinese eccentric named Li-Tung, Krug relents and lets color back into his marital life. Through a series of business triumphs and catastrophes we follow Krug in a tale whose prose and plot read like a melding of the works of Hugo Gernsback and Alfred Bester. Until you have experienced such scenes as the party thrown by Li-Tung, where "a hundred women of all races on earth danced a colorful serpentine dance on . . . majolica parquet," you haven't fully understood the kind of weird gropings toward what would become genre SF that the early twentieth century churned up. And thanks are owed to

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John A. Stuart for his in-depth annotations and captivating translation.

Dark Regions Press has issued a remarkable little novelette by Ken Wisman entitled *Eden* (chapbook, $4.95, 48 pages, ISBN 1-888993-24-3), which tells the tale of a group of life-artificers set down on a virgin planet with the goal of building an esthetically pleasing subcreation out of living matter. But the originator of the project, Calif De'Alsace, does not reckon with a rogue artist named Amendi, whose idea of beauty involves grotesques and blood. Narrated in part by a woman named Alepha, this tale combines the eccentricities of David Lindsay with the far-future ambiance of Olaf Stapledon. And Wisman's first-person prologue and epilogue, which speak seemingly "truthfully" of the role a nameless psychedelic drug played in the composition of this story, add a further level of delicious unreality to the whole affair.

Did you know that the official currency of Hell is the Canadian dollar? That's just one of the bizarre tidbits about the infernal realm unveiled in Brett Savory's *The Distance Travelled* (Prime, hardcover, $30.00, 102 pages, ISBN 0-9668968-5-8), which reads like a madcap combination of Joe Lansdale and C. S. Lewis—if you can wrap your mind around *that!* One of Hell's more hapless inhabitants, an ex-tough guy named Stuart, finds himself coerced by some of Hell's less scrupulous citizens into abetting a breakout into the world of the living. What with flying pigs, the Lake of Sorrows, and the Flame Pit Thing, the path to freedom is far from smooth. Stuart's several nasty new deaths do not contribute to success either. With a kind of *South Park* sensibility, Savory proves that rude, redneck humor will flourish even where the temperature is "four billion, one million, six hundred and fifty-two thousand, four hundred and twenty-one point seven degrees Celsius."

Two horror novels on hand exhibit uncommon restraint and ingenuity. First comes *Island Life* (Barclay Books, trade paper, $15.95, 245 pages, ISBN 1-931402-20-5) by William Meikle. A lonely island in the Scottish Hebrides, sparsely tenanted, is host to an archaeological expedition intent on opening on old barrow. But the scientists are not prepared for a surviving colony of murderous monsters led by a mad Atlantean priest named Calent. As the released creatures swamp the island, slaughtering livestock and people alike, the humans find themselves first trying to understand the threat, then combat it with few resources save their courage and wits. A female innkeeper named Anne, her grown daughter Meg, and a researcher named Duncan prove to be pivotal to meeting the threat. Meikle has an engaging, sturdy prose style. And his familiarity with the terrain and culture of his setting contributes to a lively tale, where the inevitable bloodshed has more of an old-fashioned Richard Matheson feel to it than a Stephen King texture.

Tom Piccirilli's *The Night Class* (ShadowLands Press, hardcover, $34.95, 247 pages, ISBN 1-930595-02-6) is a beast of a different color. Its academic setting—a nameless college where the hushed-up murder of a student is merely the tip of a bloody iceberg—couldn't be further removed from the Hebrides, yet Piccirilli's talent renders this familiar venue just as exotically interesting as Meikle's. Our protagonist, Caleb Prentiss, boasts a collection of helpful oddball friends who nonetheless cannot aid him in his obsessive quest to discover the secrets that underlie his school. The ridiculous Professor Yokver, a senile Dean and his wife, brutish security guards—Caleb must run a gauntlet of these

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figures, all while a case of bleeding stigmata threatens to overwhelm him. In equating education with a deliberate descent into madness, Piccirilli may have revealed a secret that will mark him for elimination by the SAT people everywhere.

PS Publishing continues to pour forth novellas of outstanding merit (available in limited hardcover format, as well as the paperback versions cited here). Three are on hand this time.

In *Diamond Dogs* (trade paper, $14.00, 111 pages, ISBN 1-902880-26-9), Alastair Reynolds combines the Byronic brio of Zelazny with the frosty intellectual prowess of Martin Gardner to form a tale of blood and brainpower. On a world named Golgotha, a single alien artifact—the Blood Spire—challenges a party of explorers to solve its mysteries, or die trying. Our viewpoint character is Richard Swift, a wealthy expert on alien psychologies (all in theory, since Reynolds's universe hosts no actual aliens). Along with four others, Swift is co-opted by one Roland Childe into taking part in the assault on the Spire, and by the tale's end he finds himself transfigured both bodily and mentally. This passion play about the seduction of intellectual puzzles, stoked by overweening pride, offers nonstop thrills.

In his previous two novels, Adam Roberts has shown himself concerned with harsh environments, wartime conditions, and the fate of innocents smashed between them. These themes figure into his newest, *Park Polar* (trade paper, $14.00, 109 pages, ISBN 1-902880-28-5). In a dystopic future, where an overpopulated globe is ruled by Companies so generic they are identified only by numbers, the arctic and antarctic wildernesses are being exploited as refuges for genetically engineered animals. Our protagonist, Dr. McCullough, trying to establish a colony of snow kangaroos, finds herself at the center of fatal treachery among the small crew of her fellow scientists. Like John Campbell's "Who Goes There?" without aliens, this chilly excursion into the psychoses of isolated individuals lays bare the existential terrors confronting humanity.

Ken Macleod's *The Human Front* (trade paper, $14.00, 75 pages, ISBN 1-902880-30-7) provides various satisfactions of many stripes. The tale begins as a straightforward uchronia, and there's much pleasure to be had in MacLeod's evocation of the jarring yet mundane touchstones of his alternate history. In this timeline, WWII devolved into a global battle between communists and imperialists, a war still raging into the 1960s and 1970s. John Matheson, whom we first encounter as a child, grows up to become a communist partisan fighting in the hills of Scotland. But when he manages to bring down one of the USA's strange UFOish bombers, his tale broadens out into a truly multiversal saga with cosmic frissons. MacLeod's trademark political savvy gets a good workout here, but he never lets his poly-sci get in the way of good ol' sci-fi wonderment.

With *Any Time Now* (Cosmos Books, trade paper, $15.00, 161 pages, ISBN 1-58715-328-9), Chris Butler delivers a charming timeslip romance that is also reminiscent of Walter Tevis's *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1963). Our heroine, Kate Chapman, is living a lonely life after the death of her husband Patrick some years prior in a terrorist bombing. Onto her doorstep one day lands a mysterious stranger named Joe, who proves to be a time-traveler from the year 2205. Joe and Kate fall in love, but the very firm Kate works for—Scholman Research, affiliated with the military—becomes aware of Joe and wants his secrets. Add in a neighborhood maniac

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named George Hurley who conceives a grudge against Kate, and the recipe is complete for suspense. Butler's writing is quietly effective, and his easygoing dialogue among the supporting cast provides a naturalistic feel to this tale of paradoxes and cross-temporal love.

With utmost ease, I can picture Chris Amies's *Dead Ground* (Big Engine Press, trade paper, £8.99, 222 pages, ISBN 1-903468-01-9) as a classic B&W film from 1931, the year in which the action of this novel takes place. Young artist Allen Delmar, eager yet innocent member of an archaeological expedition to the Polynesian islands known as the Condals, might be played by Alan Ladd. The gruff and obsessive leader of the expedition, Cosima Garton, could be brought to life by a starchy Katherine Hepburn. The besotted representative of British authority on the islands might be a good role for David Niven. Monty Woolley could pull off the mysterious Doctor Shand. And the exotic young native girl would surely go to Ida Lupino. But whatever your imaginary cast, this tale of demonic transgressions and heroism possesses enough H. Rider Haggard and Robert Louis Stevenson verve and verisimilitude to capture your imagination. Faced with an angry rampaging god who turns his followers into nonhuman killers, Allen must go native, under the tutelage of his Polynesian paramour Ata, and the results are truly thrilling.

Curiously enough, we have here a second book involving a visitor to a haunted isle and his hostile reception by the locals, but this time set much closer to home (my home, anyway). Joseph Citro's *Lake Monsters* (University Press of New England, trade paper, $14.95, 248 pages, ISBN 0-58465-110-5) concerns the relocation of Harrison Allen, failed businessman, to Friar's Island in Vermont's Lake Champlain. Allen has fixated on the notion of finding "Champy," the monster reputedly living in the Lake, as a means of remaking his life into something more glamorous. Aided by his newfound lover, schoolteacher Nancy Wells, Allen begins to discern an old supernatural mystery amongst the townspeople that is much more disturbing than his cryptozoological prey. Citro's insidiously beguiling style is as dangerously attractive as deadly nightshade, and this tale, which creatively echoes HPL's "The Dunwich Horror," easily joins the ranks of classic New England chillers.

Single-Author Collections

Manly Wade Wellman possessed a quiet dignity, a sly wit, an infallible ethical compass, and a fertile sense of invention. All these qualities are on display in the latest volume of his collected works, *Fearful Rock and Other Precarious Locales* (Night Shade Books, hardcover, $35.00, 300 pages, ISBN 1-892389-21-5). These eight stories, several at novella length, chronicle mostly smalltown, backwoods weirdnesses, although "Black Drama," with its New York City beginning and Hollywood background, brings to mind some of Fritz Leiber's cosmopolitan scenarios. A simple preacher named Jaeger stars in a handful of the pieces, while the more worldly Judge Pursuivant dominates the rest (save for one story that features neither, "For Love of a Witch," and has never been previously reprinted in over sixty years). Wellman could make even a pack of killer rabbits creepy, as in "The Dreadful Rabbits," and these stories—lovingly assembled by John Pelan, with a nostalgic introduction by Stephen Jones—hold as much enchantment today as they did during Wellman's pulp heyday.

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Does Jack Vance have any acolytes today, or is he too much the nonpareil to inspire followers? Michael Shea emulates Vance, and Gene Wolfe has declaimed his own fealty to the *Dying Earth* books. But not many other authors spring to mind as adherents to Vance's meticulous and vibrant style of fantasy.

One final name allied to Vance's, however, should be known to all discerning readers: World Fantasy Award-winner Jeff VanderMeer. Over recent years, VanderMeer has been focusing his major fictions on his intriguing city of Ambergris, where a race of aboriginal fungoid creatures plague the ultra-sophisticated human inhabitants of the eerie metropolis by the River Moth. Published in small editions, the Ambergris stories have been hard to track down until now. *City of Saints and Madmen* (Cosmos Books, trade paper, $15.00, 220 pages, ISBN 1-58715-436-6) collects the four main entries in the series, three novellas and a short story.

"Dradin, In Love" tells of the fateful infatuation of Dradin the priest for a woman only half-glimpsed. "The Hoegbotton Guide to the Early History of Ambergris, by Duncan Shriek" is a mock-historical text on the founding of the city. "The Transformation of Martin Lake" follows the ups and downs of one of Ambergris's most famous artists and his music-composer nemesis. Finally, "The Strange Case of X" takes a metafictional stance on the creation of Ambergris, as we interview a man who claims to have invented the whole world.

VanderMeer owes allegiance to other masters besides Vance, including Borges and Nabokov, and his prose reflects the high standards of his mentors. His sentences are beautifully crafted, somber yet gripping. The level of particularity with which VanderMeer invests his creation is high, and the reader is soon able to see the very cobbles of the Religious Quarter, or mentally shop the aisles of Hoegbotton and Sons. Wandering the dangerous streets of Ambergris is akin to inhabiting a waking dream, and VanderMeer deserves many more visitors to his subcreation, which this edition will hopefully draw.

Subtitled "A Triskaidecollection of Queer and Weird Stories," Steve Berman's *Tryst* (Lethe Press, trade paper, $13.00, 148 pages, ISBN 1-59021-000-X) delivers dark fantasy of varying degrees of gay eroticism. His prose somber, melancholy, and polished, Berman achieves subtle effects in a nighted palette reminiscent of this description from the opening story: "The shades of dark gray and black were all new, perhaps had never even been named before." From the Poesque "The Resurrectionist" to the Lovecraftian "Path of Corruption," Berman reinvigorates old tropes with a modern queer sensibility. Several stories take place in a deracinated urban venue known as the Fallen Area, and this homage to the Bellona of Delany's *Dhalgren* (1975) proves effective and enticing.

Although Élisabeth Vonarburg's *Slow Engines of Time* (Tesseract Books, trade paper, $11.95, 186 pages, ISBN 1-895836-30-1) was released in the year 2000, I'm just catching up with it now, and I'm very grateful I finally did. This strong collection—whose stories were published, with a single exception, between 1979 and 1986—reveals Vonarburg to be an important, albeit unacknowledged part of the cyberpunk revolution, its non-American wing, so to speak. Her five grimly beautiful tales of the near-future city Baïblanca, the capital of Euroafrica on a drowning Earth, evoke such fellow travelers as Delany, Ballard, Coney, and Gibson, while the three stories focused on the Centre, a jumping off spot for multiversal

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explorers, summon up thoughts of Le Guin and Bishop. But Vonarburg has an unmistakable style and set of themes all her own, dealing mainly with female protagonists who are outsiders to the systems they reluctantly endorse, and her world-weary yet hopeful sensibilities offer a much-needed alternative fierce voice in SF's chorus.

The noirish world of Greg Gifune, on display in *Heretics* (Delirium Books, trade paper, $20.00, 215 pages, ISBN 1-929653-18-2), is filled with confused souls leading mistake-filled lives that lead to blood and damnation. Not the most enticing of worlds, by my lights, but Gifune's skills at least do honor to his vision, as he crafts well-made tales that all function as one-way slippery slopes to wretched endings. In "Restoration," a good cop who makes one fatal mistake is plagued by guilt and a ghost until he is pushed over the final edge. This stern Calvinism imbues such narratives with a ghastly force.

Piercing ghost stories, classic high fantasy, surreal excursions, post-modern fairytales—all these types of stories and more (including several items original to this volume) can be found in Mary Soon Lee's *Winter Shadows and Other Tales* (Dark Regions press, trade paper, $11.95, 148 pages, ISBN 1-888993-23-5). Lee writes with disarming simplicity yet manages to capture complex emotions within her compact stories. Echoes of Fritz Leiber and Tanith Lee resound here and there, but a story such as "Conversation Pieces," where a woman is plagued by the vociferous demands of her common possessions, bears the hallmarks of only one person, the accomplished Mary Soon Lee.

A lively sword-and-sorcery tale opens up James Dorr's *Strange Mistresses* (Dark Regions, trade paper, $12.95, 198 pages, ISBN 1-888993-22-7), but this story represents just one arrow in Dorr's literary quiver. Contemporary spook yarns, historical fantasies of many lands and eras, oriental fables—all these and more benefit from Dorr's skilled touch. In a piece such as "The Candle Room," where a modern white witch's waxy magic opens up her lover to danger, Dorr manages to balance both darkness and light. Additionally, in a selection of poems, he reveals himself to be a fine versifier as well.

The sea runs like a dark motif through many of the accomplished tales in Brian Hopkins's *Salt Water Tears* (Dark Regions, trade paper, $12.95, 198 pages, ISBN 1-888993-21-9). Whether it's the mangrove swamps of "Crocodile Gods," where a suspenseful contest between a woman and a beast plays out, or the ocean across which the pirate Captain Laguerre ferries a mysterious woman in "Wisteria," the elemental mysteries of the depths inform Hopkins's neatly wrought chillers. Even the tawdry glitz of Fort Lauderdale is transformed, in a story such as "Sand King," into immemorial creepiness.

Darrell Schweitzer has had a string of strong story collections appear over the past couple of years, a topic he addresses in the afterword to his latest, *The Great World and the Small* (Cosmos Books, trade paper, $16.00, 171 pages, ISBN 1-587-15345-9). Filled with humor and pathos, plunging across the stylistic map from Lord Dunsany to Conan Doyle, from Ron Goulart to T.H. White, this book collects stories mostly from the nineties, and consequently reflects Schweitzer's established, mature skills. But even the trio of stories from the seventies that revolve around an unkillable sorcerer named Etelven Thios show the author to be a fellow well acquainted with the genre's history, and also able to make old dogs sit up and do new tricks.

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In the grand tradition of Gregory Benford, Arthur Clarke and, yes, Jack London, Bud Sparhawk delivers stirring tales of the rigors and challenges to be faced on the frontier of the solar system. *Dancing with Dragons* (Wildside Press, trade paper, $15.95, 253 pages, ISBN 1-58715-431-5) collects four long stories from *Analog*, plus one original, all set in a common future where human activity around Jupiter and its satellites involves dealing with Europa-quakes and Jovian storms. Sparhawk's characters are all bold and courageous, without being unreal supermen, and he has a flair for conveying widescreen action.

Anthologies

Two small magazines, the first a one-shot, offer stories of the highest caliber, by familiar names.... *is this a cat?* (The Fortress of Words, chapbook, $4.00, 48 pages, ISBN unavailable), assembled by Christopher Rowe, centers around a ghostly cat depicted on the cover, who elicits playful, slipstreamy noodlings from such folks as Scott Westerfeld, Jeffrey Ford, and Alex Irvine. This is an in-joke that expands to include the universe. And issue number two of John Klima's *Electric Velocipede* (Spilt Milk Press, chapbook, $3.00, 36 pages, ISBN unavailable) finds Jeff VanderMeer and Mark Rich, among others, contributing their usual sterling efforts. But the undisputed winner here is "Mr Brain and the Island of Lost Socks," by Richard Bowes and Ezra Pines, which conflates R.A. Lafferty, Mark Leyner, and Jonathan Lethem to fine effect.

Here's a unique concept for a book: four authors who form a kind of clubby cabal of dedicated journeymen eager for wider exposure will pool their efforts into a single volume, a kind of joint assault on the ramparts of horror fiction publishing. The result is *4 x 4* (Delirium Books, trade paper, $18.00, 185 pages, ISBN 1-929653-20-4), a decidedly splatterpunkish assemblage of eight stories, some solo outings, some shifting collaborations among Michael Oliveri, Geoff Cooper, Brian Keene, and Michael T. Huyck, Jr. Rude and vigorous, brawling and nasty, these stories exhibit a shared sensibility somewhere on the pop spectrum near the rock groups Korn and Limp Bizkit. Keene's "Earthworm Gods" is actually somewhat restrained in its depiction of a rainy apocalypse, and the story most to my own tastes. But the others deserve a fair amount of commendation for their bloody bravado.

British editors L.H. Maynard and M.P.N. Sims exhibit a sensibility I like. Old-fashioned yet not blind to contemporary trends, they have a gift for selecting timeless tales that range across the map of creepiness. Their books do not pander, insult or outrage, but instead simply deliver subtle chills and shivers. Their new series is entitled *Darkness Rising*, and volumes I and II are now available from Cosmos Books. The stories in Volume I, *Night's Soft Pains* (trade paper, $12.00, 142 pages, ISBN 1-58715-406-4), are generally shorter than those in Volume II, *Hideous Dreams* (trade paper, $12.00, 177 pages, ISBN 1-58715-445-5), but otherwise the books are much alike. New writers consort with more-established ones, and each author carves out a small parcel of spookiness. In Volume I, I particularly enjoyed "Old Lady Cat-Trash" by Rain Graves and Mark McLaughlin, an excursion into Southern Gothic nastiness. One standout from Volume II was Rhys Hughes's "The Century Just Gone," which finds two sleazy true-crime freaks meeting justice in an appropriate manner. And the excellent Victorian reprints in each

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volume—"Marriot's Monkey" by Howard Jones and "The Black Statue" by Huan Mee—tie these books into a long and proud lineage of ghostly narratives.

Miscellaneous Titles

Several SF poets, employing a variety of styles, arrive with new books this roundup. The prodigious and powerful Bruce Boston alone has three: *Quanta* (Miniature Sun Press, chapbook, $8.00, 64 pages, ISBN 0-9676666-1-9) is especially notable for Boston's informative forewords and an autobiographical essay, "The Making of a Speculative Poet." My favorite poem here is, admittedly, one of the slighter ones: "Old Robots Are the Worst," where humor leavens a portrait of cyberdecrepitude. *In Far Pale Clarity* (Quixsilver Press, broadside, $4.00, ISBN 0-9615768-0-4) traverses several vivid surreal landscapes colored by shifting hues of emotion. And *White Space* (Dark Regions Press, trade paper, 90 pages, ISBN 1-888993-20-0) functions almost as a sampler of Boston's astonishing output, with entries ranging from horror to SF to contemporary. "My Wife Returns As She Would Have It" affectingly recounts an epiphanical experience related to the sad passing of Boston's spouse, Maureen. Longtime readers of this magazine will easily recognize the byline of F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre, whose poetry graced these pages in their earliest days. Now assembled in *Improbable Bestiary* (Wildside Press & Zadok Allen: Publisher, trade paper, $15.00, 158 pages, ISBN 1-58715-472-2), MacIntyre's formalistically accomplished poems exhibit a lighthearted air of pleasure in their composition. Something like "The Bump in the Night" shows a positively Seussian flair for wordplay. And several short stories are included as lagniappe. Finally, Linda Addison's *Consumed, Reduced to Beautiful Grey Ashes* (Space & Time, trade paper, $7.00, 56 pages, ISBN 0-917053-13-3), a strong sophomore effort, contains such gems as "The Morpheus Calculation," which postulates a redemptive apocalypse in shimmering, subtle lines.

Artists Boris Vallejo and his accomplished ex-pupil Julie Bell possess such similar bravura styles that it's only natural they should share a book—or in fact, two. From Thunder's Mouth Press arrives, first, *Superheroes* (trade paper, $24.95, 160 pages, ISBN 1-56025-339-8), which features over 170 images of characters from the universe of Marvel Comics. Originally issued as trading cards, these colorful, action-heavy paintings now benefit from large-scale reproduction and knowledgeable captioning by author Nigel Suckling. Anyone familiar with the canonical representations of such characters as the Hulk, Spider-Man, and Doctor Strange will relish the panel-busting reinterpretations offered here. *Sketchbook* (hardcover, $34.95, 160 pages, ISBN 1-56025-347-9) discloses a gentler side to the duo, for among the archetypical struggling barbarians and cavorting centaur maidens we find some contemplative nature studies. Filled with textual insights into their creative processes, this book should inspire the budding artist as well as enchant the dedicated fan of the Frazetta School of Painting.

Recently here I praised a book focusing on the career of comics artist Carmine Infantino. Now we have a similar volume devoted to Gil Kane, a name linked with the Silver Age of DC Comics as firmly as Infantino's. *Gil Kane: The Art of the Comics* (Hermes Press, trade paper, $29.99, 185 pages, ISBN 0-9710311-2-6) does not feature as many color

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plates as the Infantino volume, but even the B&W art is arrestingly beautiful. Daniel Herman's text—a tad on the stuffy side, but scrupulously supportive and detailed, nonetheless—follows Kane from his earliest work in the 1940s right up to the final drawings he did nearly on his deathbed. (Kane died in January 2000.) The portrait of the artist that emerges is a touching one, limning a humble creator always half doubtful of his own stature. The book closes with an interview with Kane, and his final comment therein—although a little disjointed—stands as one of the best descriptions of artistic devotion I've yet seen: "It's like some intricate effort and years after everyone's lost interest in looking at it you're still stuck with working it through and find that it keeps evolving and evolving enough to keep your mind and personality occupied to the point where it becomes, besides from your family, my chief preoccupation."

Classy graphic novels arrive this time from two firms with large programs and backlists that demand your attention. *Raptors III* (NBM, trade paper, $10.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-56163-298-8), by the team of Dufaux and Marini, continues the saga of warring vampire clans in current New York. Brother and sister Drago and Camilla battle alone against the plans of their undying peers to reduce all of humanity to cattle. One highlight: an aerial swordfight between Drago and a mysterious newcomer named Akeba that parallels the wonders of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Erotic and bloody by turns, this sumptuously rendered urban nightmare is proving to have legs as long as Camilla's. Meanwhile, in another corner of the NBM multiverse, a sexy, tough-gal elf named Meg—who fancies wearing a derby, a thong bikini and backless chaps that reveal her pert bare butt—is risking her life as a bounty hunter in the thrillingly hilarious *Far West* (trade paper, $13.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-56163-297-X). Richard Moore provides both script and B&W art, both of which are never cluttered or fussy, but rather a refinement of conventional mainstream comics styles. Meg's partner is a non-anthropomorphic intelligent bear named Phil (Phil has a little trouble holding his shotgun, and won't disgrace himself by running on all fours in mud), and together they make a delightful hash out of all the Old West clichés. NBM's third offering is *Amnesia* (trade paper, $9.95, 64 pages, ISBN 1-56163-296-1), by John Malloy. Black and white art reminiscent of Ben Katchor's, mingled with photomontages, conveys a surreal tale involving Chloe, a journalist, and her subject, Ike Reuben, renaissance man, who suffers from a strange kind of narcolepsy that brings him into contact with otherworldly visitors. The melancholy tone of their odd interactions is brought to a seemingly tragic ending, which is torqued toward hopefulness by its epilogue.

Humanoids Publishing USA is a branch of the French firm *Les Humanoïdes Associés*, and consequently focuses on European art in impeccable translations. *From Cloud 99: Memories Part One* (hardcover, $14.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-930652-00-3) by an artist-writer named Yslaire is a Pynchonesque tale of an elderly psychologist named Eva Stern who begins to receive strange angelic transmissions over the internet, transmissions which seem to sketch a hidden history of the twentieth century revolving around her long-missing brother, Frank. The effectively moody art recalls that of Bill Sienkiewicz, and is alluringly enigmatic. Further installments of this tale will be much

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anticipated. Created by the legendary Moebius, Humanoids' ongoing series, *The Metabarons,* is now in the masterful hands of scripter Alexandro Jodorowsky and artist Juan Gimenez, whose distinctive style bears a keen debt to Moebius's. The first volume, *Path of the Warrior* (trade paper, $14.95, 160 pages, ISBN 1-930652-47-X), recounts the origin of the powerful Metabarons clan on the backward mining planet Marmola, while the second, *Blood and Steel* (trade paper, $14.95, 136 pages, ISBN 1-930652-24-0) pursues the fate of subsequent generations. A titanic space opera reminiscent of Herbert, van Vogt, Asimov, Lem, and Cordwainer Smith, this insanely detailed opus—both the half-limned backstory and the dense artwork provide endless fascinations—is certainly the richest SF work in the history of comics. When you factor in the merits of *The Incal*, a linked series, then Jodorowsky and Gimenez surely deserve to sweep all the plaudits the SF genre has to offer.

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SF Conventional Calendar

The autumn convention season is in full swing right now, from coast to coast. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

OCTOBER 2002

18–20—**ConStellation.** For info, write: **Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815.** Or phone Marie at (256) 880-8210 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.con-stellation.org. (E-mail) constell@con-stellation.org.** Con will be held in: Huntsville AL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Tom Bevill Center. Guests will include: none announced at press time.

18–20—**CapClave. www.wsfa.org. wsfa@kiethlynch.net.** Silver Spring MD (Washington DC). Second year for this con.

18–20—**MileHiCon. (303) 657-5912. www.milehicon.org.** Sheraton, Lakewood (Denver) CO. Norman Spinrad, John Ford.

18–20—**ICon. (319) 626-2099. www.mindbridge.org/icon.** Sheraton, Cedar Rapids IA. J. Roberson, J. Garner, Hevelin.

18–20—**ConJecture. www.conjecture.org. info@conjecture.org.** Mission Valley Doubletree, San Diego CA. S. Brust.

18–20—**Ditto. (905) 281-8540. www.circlenk.com/ditto.** Days Inn Downtown, Toronto ON. Classic fanzine fans' meet.

18–20—**SugoiCon. www.sugoicon.org.** Airport Holiday Inn, Cincinnati OH. S. Bennett, Doug Smith, R. DeJesus. Anime.

19–20—**Ireland Nat'l. Con. www.octocon.com. info@octocon.com.** Royal Marine Hotel, Dun Laoghaire (Dublin) Ireland.

24–28—**HanseCon. hra.hanse@heinrich-arenz.de.** CVJM-Haus, Lübeck Germany.

25–27—**ConClave. conclavesf.org.** Holiday Inn South, Lansing MI. Larry Niven, Susan Van Kamp, Peg Huffaker.

25–27—**ConSume. (651) 483-6290. www.relaxacon.tripod.com.** Ramada Inn NW, Brooklyn Park (Mpls.) MN. Relaxacon.

25–27—**Chiller Theatre. www.chillertheatre.com.** Sheraton Meadowlands, E. Rutherford NJ (near NYC). Horror film.

25–27—**OctoCon. (513) 922-3234. scribe@cfg.org.** Four Points Sheraton, Cincinnati OH. Low-key relaxacon.

26–27—**Creation. (818) 409-0960. www.creationent.com.** Ford Center, Dearborn MI. Commercial media-SF/fantasy con.

26–27—**VulKon. (954) 441-8735. www.vulkon.com. joemotes@aol.com.** Baltimore MD. Commercial Star Trek event.

31–Dec.3—**World Fantasy Con, 912 W. Lake St., Minneapolis MN 55408. (612) 823-6161.** Hilton. Etchison, Carroll.

NOVEMBER 2002

1–3—**AstronomiCon, Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603. (585) 342-4697. ralston@aol.com.** Four Points Sheraton. Weber.

1–3—**Ohio Valley Filk Fest, 3824 Patricia Dr., Columbus OH 43220.** Wyndham, Dublin OH. SF/fantasy folksinging.

1–3—**AyaCon, 118 Kingston Rd. #1, London SW19 1LY, UK. www.ayacon.org.uk.** Moat House, N'thampton UK. Anime.

1–3—**BasCon, Box 282197, San Francisco CA 94128. www.bascon.org. info@bascon.org.** Adult media fanzines.

1–3—**NovaCon, 379 Myrtle Rd., Sheffield S2 3HQ, UK. xl5@zoom.co.uk.** Quality, Bentley, Walsall, UK. Ian MacDonald.

1–3—**Wolf SG-5, Box 1419, Slough PDO SL2 5WJ, UK. (01753) 771-078.** London UK. Gary Jones, D. Davis. StarGate.

8–10—**WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. (847) 677-9639. www.windycon.org.** Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL.

8–10—**TusCon, Box 27307, Tucson AZ 85726. www.home.earthlink.net/~basfa. basfa@earthlink.net.** InnSuites.

8–10—**United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8735.** Marriott, Springfield MA. Media SF.

8–10—**Rising Star, Box 10787, Blacksburg VA 24062. www.rising-star.org.** Glenvar High School, Salem VA. Media.

8–10—**Beach Bash, c/o Box 16337, Atlanta GA 30321. www.beachbash.virtualave.net.** Myrtle Beach SC. Media SF.

8–10—**NekoCon, Box 4141, Greensboro NC 27404. www.nekocon.org.** Holiday Inn, Virginia Beach VA. Frazier. Anime.

8–10—**EclecticCon, 9-11 Ayres Ct., Bayonne NJ 07002. badkarma@bestweb.net.** Newark NJ. Adult media fanzines.

8–10—**ArmadaCon, 4 Gleneagle Ave., Mannamead Plymouth PL3 5HL, UK. www.armadacon.org.** Copthorne Hotel.

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NEXT ISSUE

JANUARY ISSUE

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Speaking of what we've got coming up for you, our January issue, on sale on November 19, 2002, features two big novellas: First, Hugo-winner **Bruce Sterling** teams up with cyberpunk guru **Rudy Rucker** on a wild, frenetic, and freewheeling fictional rollercoaster ride that demonstrates some of the potentials, dangers, and weird surprises of "Junk DNA." Then **Steven Popkes** changes pace for us, taking us to a near-future America for a poignant, lyrical, and thoughtful look at one man's life (a life changed forever by one bizarre revelation), and at his complex lifelong love/hate relationship with "The Ice."

ALSO IN JANUARY

But that's not all! Hugo and Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** returns with a fascinating look at future politics and the price of loyalty, as she examines "The War on Treemon"; **Mary Rosenblum**, returns after much too long an absence with a study of a "Golden Bird" in a strange future society dependant on her song; **Robert Reed** treats us to a mind-bending cosmic take on "Rejection"; and **Sally McBride** portrays a child's curious and bittersweet transformation, in "Pick My Bones with Whispers."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column raises the chilling possibility—**far** worse than spam!—of "Email from Cthulhu"; **James Patrick Kelly's** "On the Net" column investigates "Cover Art"; and **Peter Heck** brings you "On Books"; plus an array of poems, and other features.

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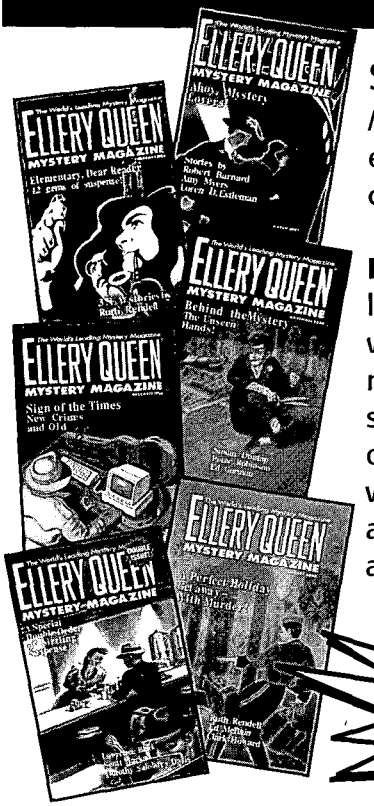

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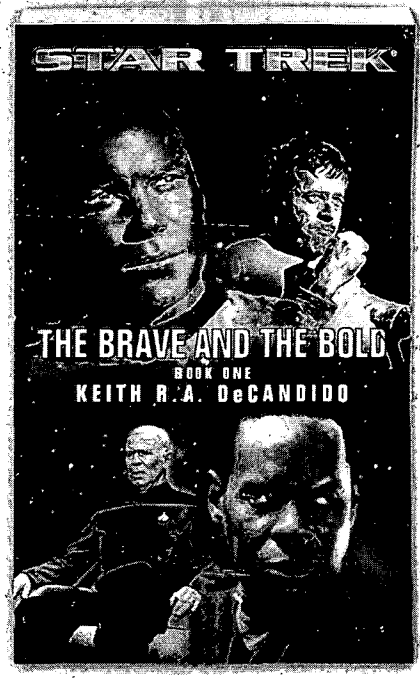

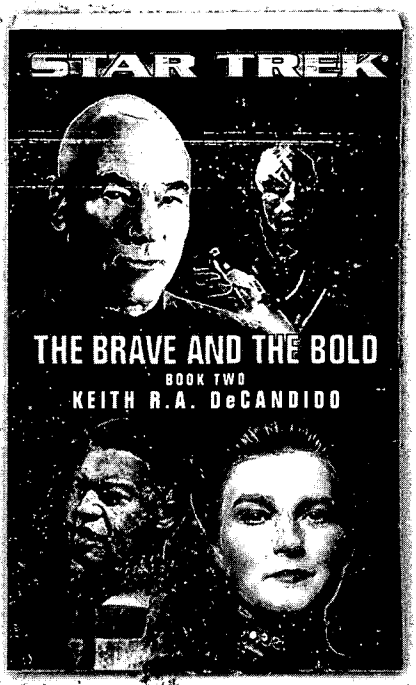

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